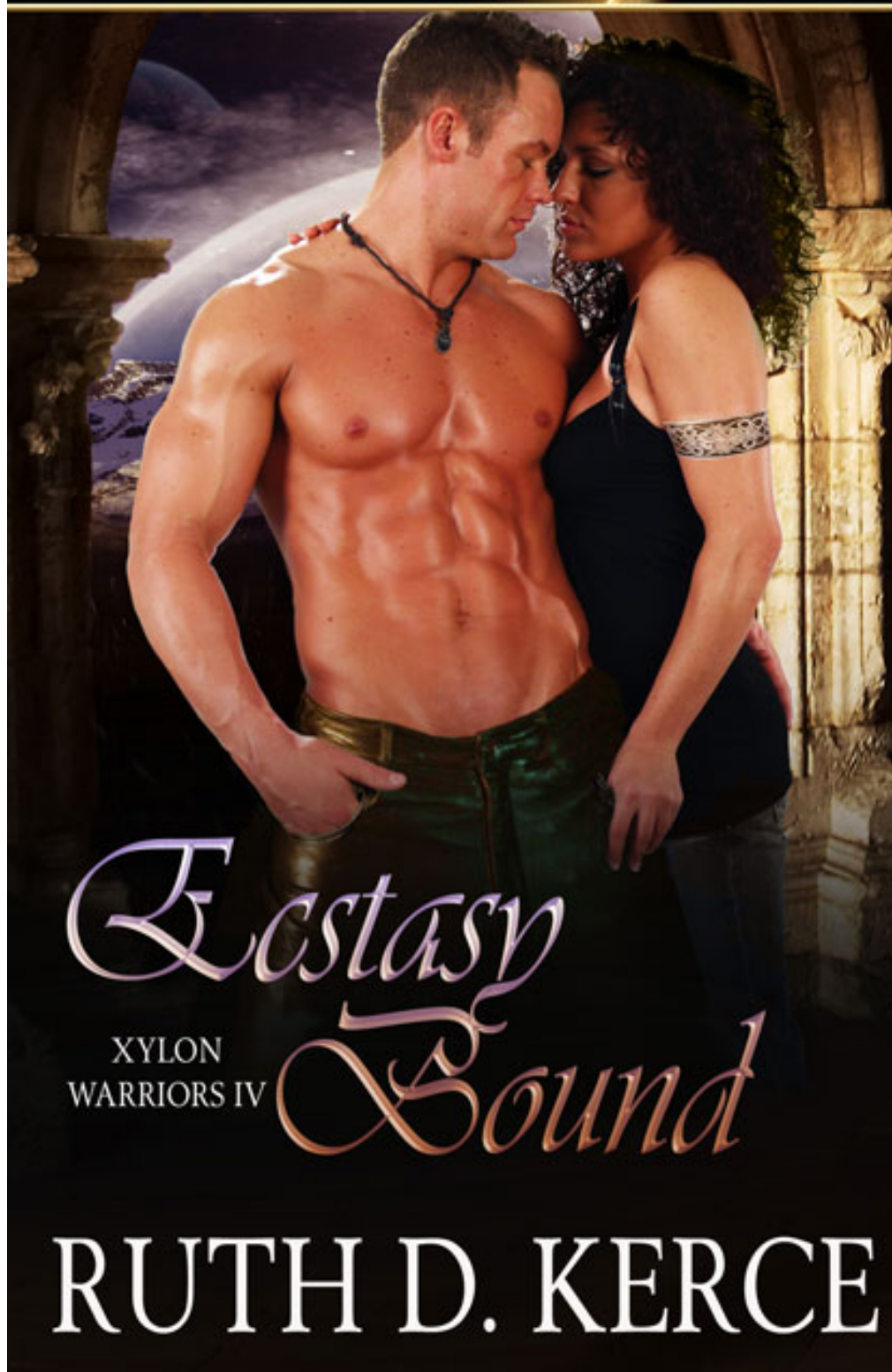


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Ecstasy

XYLON
WARRIORS IV

Bound

RUTH D. KERCE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Ecstasy Bound

ISBN 9781419921902

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Edited by Pamela Campbell.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication March 2009

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ECSTASY BOUND

Ruth D. Kerce

Prologue

Post-War

She tossed and turned, unable to rid her thoughts of the horror. Gone. Everything was gone. A sob escaped her throat. Never would she have believed it possible.

Would she die too? She didn't even know exactly where she was. A scary feeling to be trapped somewhere and unable to get out.

Her head hurt and it felt as if she were spinning. Blurred visions swam before her eyes and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't clear them. Maybe it was her mind's way of protecting her from the truth, from the inevitable horror of the situation, when the stress became too much for her to handle otherwise.

A strange reaction since she'd been trained to handle stress. Pain. Loss. But when she'd needed it the most, all her intense training had proven to be lacking on the emotional side of survival. Not until now had she truly realized the importance of keeping tight control on one's inner feelings in order to hold on to sanity.

She reached out toward the blurred movement in front of her, needing an anchor to grab close. She knew something was happening for she felt naked—felt cool air wafting over her flesh. Even so, her body temperature rose and she began to sweat.

She didn't feel her body healing. She should be healing.

A pair of male hands touched her flesh, caressing her stomach. She jerked and her hands came down to join his. Large hands. Thick fingers. Who? He touched her gently, soothing her. She couldn't see a face, just a dark figure hovering above her, but his touch made her feel achy, needy. *Ah, yes.*

Born Xylon, she needed another's touch. A man's touch. Even not knowing who he was, she craved the physical connection. Something to ground her, to prove to her that she truly was still alive.

All Xylons required sex, and often, to connect emotionally as well as physically on a level deeper than most species. They needed sex to survive. Without the intimate connection, without the sharing of their healing abilities through unique sexual rites, the Warrior race would have died out years ago.

Fuck me, she begged internally, her throat too raw to speak the words aloud.

He eased her over onto her stomach.

A pair of black boots stepped in front of her. The boots looked Xylon but she wasn't certain, given her blurred vision. A man, judging from the size. She must be on the ground. *Yes.* On a mat. Her breasts pressed against the thin padding. Her nipples hardened, hoping to feel a cock inside her soon.

She heard a low chuckle. Definitely male. Two of them. Her anticipation and needs grew stronger.

The male in front of her crouched down to stroke her hair. From behind, long fingers probed her pussy and she mewled. One finger entered her intimately, deeply. *Ah...* The feel of him pressing inside her made her crave his cock even more.

The man before her shifted to his knees. It looked as if he were tugging at the front of his pants. Two men eager and ready to fuck her. Oh how she wanted that. The man finger-fucking her stopped and spread her legs. She felt him kneel between her thighs.

Two pairs of hands raised her to her hands and knees, preparing her with a more tender touch than she'd expected. She raised her ass slightly, showing them that she craved penetration. A large cock pushed against her lips and another large cock pressed against the opening of her soaked cunt.

She wished she could see clearly, but still, she knew what to do, what she wanted. She sucked the tip of the cock in front of her into her mouth. Delicious. Warm against her tongue. Musky. The cock behind her shoved into her hard. *Ah. Mmm.* She heard two deep, almost animalistic growls.

The sounds vibrated through her body. She felt the excitement, the building of the tension. Her clit throbbed and immediately she came. The sexual explosion rocked her body. It had been too long since her last orgasm. She groaned and trembled. Her body needed the release as much as her mind did.

The cock pumping her pussy swelled and her muscles gripped the shaft. She wanted to feel him climax, to feel his cum fill her. At the same time she sucked deeply on the cock in her mouth, needing to taste everything he had. The man behind her groaned and came hard inside her. As she heard another groan, the cock in her mouth spewed cum down her throat. She felt no pain as she swallowed, only soothing warmth.

More. I need more.

As if sensing her still-present need, the man behind her slapped her ass repeatedly. *Oh!* The slaps distracted her from the aches in her body, so the only thing she felt was sexual need. Her ass burned. She came again, milking the man inside her of his remaining seed. She continued to suck the second man, taking everything from him.

Both men pulled out of her, but they didn't leave her. One of the men slid under her. His hands slid around to her ass and he pulled her down atop his mouth. She moaned as he took her clit into his mouth and sucked. She felt his fingers pulling at her ass cheeks. The other man's wet tongue plunged into her hole. *Ah!* She squirmed as the sexual sparks that flew through her body.

When the man beneath her bit her clit, she jerked and shrieked. Not in pain, but in ecstasy. The man behind her circled his tongue in her ass hole, then tongue-fucked her in deep plunges, getting in as far as he could.

She came, over and over, feeling completely at their mercy and loving it.

Just when she thought she'd pass out from the pleasure the two were giving her, her eyelids began to feel heavy and everything faded – the blurred visions, the men, her orgasms. All gone. Time seemed to drift away and she couldn't open her eyes.

Once more she was lying on her stomach. What had happened? Had she passed out? Fallen asleep for a while?

Finally able to force her eyes open, she rolled over and sat up faster than was prudent. *Ah!* Her body exploded in pain and she dropped her head to her hands. That's when she noticed for the first time that her hands were wrapped.

Every muscle and limb hurt. A wave of nausea gripped her, then passed. Though her vision remained blurred, she could feel she was no longer naked. She also sensed that nobody else was around.

With trembling limbs, she pushed herself up off the mat. She wobbled slightly, as if she'd consumed too much fermented fruit. Pain speared up to her eyeballs and down her spine.

She stood still. And she remembered... Had it been real?

The sexual encounter had to have been nothing more than her imagination. Even though she felt fucked and swore she could taste a man's cum on her tongue.

She shook her head, then winced, regretting the action. She stumbled forward. She needed answers. Soon.

Chapter One

Planet Xylon

Auxiliary Underground Shelter

Class 1 Warrior Brianna Koll entered the small control room. When she saw nobody else around, she made her way to the far end of the confined space to stare at a small wall-mounted monitor that displayed the surface of Xylon. Or what was left of it.

"The beautiful landscapes. The mountains. All gone," she whispered, her words catching in her throat. Flattened by a PowerII Rad bomb. Only a deadly, gaseous fog drifted over the ground now, as if searching for any last victims. Few fires even burned. Nothing remained on the barren world to catch fire.

The picture on the monitor flickered and turned to static. She switched it off.

How she and the others had survived the attack, she didn't know. Even the Lair, their main underground military facility, had been destroyed.

As she stared at the blank monitor, she felt equally blank. Numb, actually. She'd gone through the sadness, the anger, the disbelief. Now she felt nothing.

For hours after the bomb had hit, she'd searched the monitor channels, occasionally spotting a survivor on the planet's surface. Stumbling, gasping for breath, in agony.

None of them had lasted long. They'd looked like monsters, their skin charred or melted off the bone. Their faces beyond recognition.

Each time she had seen someone alive, her heart had leapt, thinking it might be her sister. At the same time she hadn't wanted Tara to survive, to suffer. A swift death was a better death.

At the thought of her sister, she almost broke down. "So much for feeling nothing. Nothing couldn't possibly hurt like this." A tear escaped and she swiped it from her cheek.

They knew that some other Warriors had also survived – those stationed on nearby outposts, located on the surrounding moons. She'd personally seen the rescue orbiters on the monitors but none of those she'd spotted had landed, which confirmed to her just how bad the situation up top must be.

No way existed right now for the underground survivors to contact those other Warriors. All communications had been knocked out. They were on their own.

She felt someone step up behind her and she turned her head slightly.

A pair of strong hands settled on her shoulders. "They're waiting for you," a deep voice said. "The meeting is about to begin."

Despite her despair, that deep, sexy voice sent a tingle right down her spine. Briggs. Lieutenant Colonel Samuel "Ramrod" Briggs. An Earth man. An elite and highly

decorated United States Air Force fighter pilot. Trapped here with them. On Xylon, for reasons she had no knowledge of.

She nodded, acknowledging his words. Only her lack of further knowledge about Briggs held her back from turning in his arms, where she really wanted to be. Just to feel something, anything, other than this constant pain.

"I'm here for you," he whispered against her ear.

He'd read her thoughts, her needs, easier than she'd expected. She bit her lower lip to stop from groaning at the tingle that passed through her when his lips brushed her skin.

Briggs' strength drew her. And amazed her, given that he was stranded on a dead world, completely alien to him, with no means to get back home. He seemed surprisingly calm and totally solid in his belief of their survival.

Briggs would have no problem comforting her, fucking her. He'd made his interest clear on more than one occasion. With him though, her desire wasn't just about sex and she'd learned over the years to be cautious where her heart was concerned. Still, the idea greatly appealed to her.

"Brianna? The meeting?" He squeezed her shoulders.

"Will you be there?" she asked.

"Not to begin with. Laszlo will call me in later, he said. I was told that only the Warriors down here will be present for the entire meeting."

Meaning Josella, Alexa and former Council Member Delemar also wouldn't be attending. Thirteen adults had survived here. The shelter was constructed for no more than eight. And now Alexa's three newborns—two beautiful girls and an adorable boy—had been added to the mix. The supplies wouldn't last. They all couldn't remain underground for long or they'd perish right along with the rest of Xylon.

She turned and stared up into Briggs' compelling brown eyes, desperately wanting to fuck him despite her reservations, for she needed that connection. Now was not the time though. She walked out of the control room with him at her side. They headed down the narrow corridor. When they neared the meeting room, he reached out and squeezed her hand.

"It'll be all right, Brianna."

"I don't think so." She forced back the moisture in her eyes. She couldn't enter the meeting in tears. Not as a Command Warrior. But controlling her emotions was not easy. Even if they did get out of here, Tara would still be lost to them. That alone meant nothing would ever be the same. She started to turn away but Briggs tugged her back. She saw genuine sorrow reflected in his gaze.

"I understand your pain." The fingers of his free hand stroked her cheek.

Oh, how she loved his touch. So strong, yet gentle at the same time. Just what she needed.

"Don't give up hope. We'll find a way out of here. In time your heart will heal. Life is full of little miracles that can make things more bearable than we ever believed possible." He tipped her chin with his finger and lowered his head. "Trust me," he whispered. His lips covered hers in a soft, though compelling, kiss.

She mewled against his mouth, all her emotions rising to just below the surface and threatening to break free. She did trust him...and more. Her arms snaked around his waist.

When he pulled away, she saw raw desire in his eyes. But he took a step back and the look of desire turned to something else, something she couldn't quite identify.

"Go join the others." With a reassuring smile, he sat down outside the meeting room on one of the white benches positioned along the corridor. "I'll be in later."

She nodded, grateful for his presence and strength. Someone to offer her the type of comfort that the others here couldn't. She turned and walked through the entry when it opened, stepping just far enough inside for the panels to whoosh closed behind her.

Briggs let out a heavy breath. That simple kiss, though not their first, had rocked him more than he'd expected. He scrubbed a hand down his face, only then realizing that his fingers were trembling. "Damn." No woman had ever affected him this way.

Something powerful was growing between him and Brianna. In her eyes, for the first time, he'd seen a startling truth. She needed him. He already knew that he needed her. Fiercely.

Even so, his mission came first.

He waited a few moments to make certain that neither she nor anyone else emerged from the room unexpectedly. When all remained still, he glanced up and down the hall, checking that no one was wandering the side corridors. He reached inside a hidden compartment in the heel of his combat boot and pulled out a high-powered communications device.

The device was one-way only but served better than anything else Earth had available to report the progress here back to his superiors. Luckily, it had gone undetected. And hopefully, it worked as designed.

Though tested extensively before he'd left, to work even deep underground, nothing was guaranteed, which he'd been well aware of before accepting this assignment. He knew he'd be on his own out here. On an alien planet. In an alien solar system. Where his own kind couldn't get to him if he needed help.

When he'd first materialized here, he hadn't even remembered he had the device. He hadn't remembered a lot of things. Slowly his brain had adjusted to the dematerialization process which had ripped him from his own world, and everything about Project ACE returned to him.

The project was not quite what Laszlo, the Xylon leader, had originally intended it to be. No way would any government of Earth completely trust some alien who'd appeared out of nowhere and approached certain members of NATO with a wild story of half-lizard, half-humanoid Slave Masters coming to Earth.

They'd believed Laszlo enough to agree to a military exchange but that was it. Earth had been in alliance with alien civilizations for years and had never before been threatened with a hostile invasion. The public just didn't know about Earth's alien alliances. Nor did the government have any plans to tell them.

The problem was, if Laszlo had indeed spoken the truth about an invasion, Earth might be forced to rely on alien assistance more than they wanted. And end up indebted to a society that could demand more than Earth's governments wanted to give in return for their help.

Xylon supposedly had vowed to protect all free societies. From what he'd seen, he believed the Warriors' motives were genuine. So far, they'd treated him well and with respect. He'd gotten especially close to Brianna.

"Brianna." Just the sound of her name on his lips made him want her. He vividly remembered their first meeting when he'd been isolated in a military facility they'd called the Lair. He could still feel her full lips wrapped around him, sucking his cock, during what they'd labeled an Initiation. A protection rite of some sort from what he'd been told.

Since then, he had ached to fuck her. But the timing hadn't been right. He knew he shouldn't be thinking about such things but, hell, he was only human.

A woman like Brianna would make any man hard from just looking at her soft mouth, her long, dark brown hair and that killer body displayed in her tight black uniform, which accentuated to perfection her full breasts and firm ass. Intelligent and a high-ranking military officer. To say he was impressed with her was an understatement.

Their beginning had been atypical to say the least. But from the first time he'd seen her in the Lair, he had known she was special. His thoughts drifted back to that first meeting...

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At the sound of the heavy silver-white door sliding open, Briggs turned, still holding a chair he'd been about to throw across the room. A woman stepped inside the chamber and hit a button on the wall. With a soft whirr, the panel eased closed, locking her in with him and the other two women in the room.

He stood naked before her and looked her dead in the eye. Whatever they had done to him was causing chaos in his system. He couldn't think straight. His thoughts centered solely on sex and he had little control over his actions.

This woman who had entered was different than the other two. More sexual. He could sense it. And he wanted her. He wanted her to feel his cock in her cunt, wanted her to submit to him. When he saw her nipples harden beneath her uniform, he knew she was affected by him, by his naked body. Perspiration even dotted her skin. It took every ounce of strength he had not to release the chair, grab her by her long hair and plunge his cock inside her cunt.

As she stared at him, her gaze lowered to the dark hair on his chest. Then to his crotch. Semi-hard, in his anger and desire, his purplish-red cock stood thick and long. Her tongue eased out to moisten her bottom lip.

He growled low in his throat. Oh yes. She wanted to fuck. She wanted him.

At the sound he made, her gaze snapped up to his.

Briggs put down the slat-backed metal chair he was holding. His breathing remained labored. His nostrils flared. His hands opened and closed, forming fists, then his fingers stretched to their full length, only to curl back into tight fists once again. He had to maintain control as best as he could.

She looked toward the two females on the far side of the room, standing warily in the corner. "Where is your Class 1 leader?" she asked.

"We don't have one, ma'am," the short blonde-haired one answered.

"Explain."

"Tara Koll was our trainer. We haven't been reassigned yet."

With a nod, she looked back at him. "We're here to help you," she told him, speaking slowly as if he might have trouble understanding her.

He understood her words, but still felt like a trapped, enraged animal stuck in some sort of breeder cycle and unable to get relief.

"I know you're feeling like your insides are being torn apart. We can help, if you let us. I'm going to approach you," she said in a calm voice.

"Ma'am," the blonde warned, "that's not a good idea. We're unable to call for medical help should he injure you."

"It'll be fine." With a soft smile, she looked at him and slowly stepped forward. "You're not going to hurt me, are you, Colonel?"

The use of his rank surprised him and calmed him somewhat. She knew who he was. But who was she? She wore a uniform, different than the others. Carefully, she reached her hand toward him.

In a flash, he grabbed her outstretched hand and yanked her against his chest. Oh, her body felt good against his bare skin.

"Brianna!" the red-haired female shouted.

"It's all right," she replied calmly to the two women who'd started toward them, ready to defend her. "Stay back." She looked up at him. "See. No retaliation. We won't hurt you, if you don't hurt us." She hadn't countered his move, hadn't tried to get away.

His gaze darted toward the blonde and redhead, then back at her. "What..." He kept swallowing, having trouble speaking. "What's happening?" he growled. He wanted answers.

"I don't know the details of why you're here, Colonel, but what we call an Initiation has been started on you. It's a sexual process used to protect Warriors and Breeders from diseases and poisons, and also to prepare the body for mating purposes."

His brow arched at the term "sexual process" and his eyes widened considerably at "mating purposes". What had he gotten himself into?

"Why an Earth man is being put through the rite, I don't understand. Your procedure was ordered by a former leader, and the order was never cancelled. The chemicals we used have increased your sexual desire. You must allow us to finish the ceremony and sate you, or your mind might snap due to the imbalance now in your brain. That's why you're feeling confused."

"Sate me?"

"Sexually."

A smile tugged at his lips. "You?" His cock almost exploded right there at the thought.

"The three of us."

Again, his gaze darted toward the other two. He tried to clear his thoughts, knowing something wasn't right here. His hold tightened around her waist. "You're lying. This is a...military facility. Not some sort of...brothel." His words came out roughly, not flowing in a normal tone. Another side-effect of the chemicals they'd given him?

She leaned into him, relaxing against his torso. He could feel her nipples through her uniform and he almost groaned. Her lips brushed his bare chest, as if by accident. But her move was no accident. He'd bet on it. Her tongue eased out to caress his skin. At the moist contact, he jerked. And moaned. He couldn't stop himself, though he tried to cover the sound with a forced cough.

"Your body needs us," she explained. "Let me go." Her voice lowered. "Let me suck your cock, Colonel."

His body immediately tightened. He wanted her to suck his cock. Wanted it bad.

"Sam...please. I feel your need."

The use of his given name finally crumpled his defenses. "Oh, fucking yeah," he groaned, pushing her down to her knees. "Do it."

Briggs caressed her rich brown hair as she kneeled in front of him. She was a real beauty, with incredible green eyes. Brianna, one of the females had called her. From her take-charge manner and the way she'd spoken to the other two women, as well as her uniform, he assumed her to be of some higher rank or command around here.

They'd given him something in a drink he'd sipped earlier. He was certain. Since then, his body had felt on fire...for sex, and now this woman wanted to suck his cock. He wasn't about to refuse.

Brianna lightly raked her nails down the back of his thighs.

The pleasure almost dropped him to his knees. If this was some way to get military secrets out of him, she performed her job well. He wasn't about to reveal anything—other than what was already authorized through the ACE project, no matter what she did. But he couldn't stop his body from responding. His cock ached and he craved to feel her mouth sucking the blunt tip and sliding over his shaft. "Yeah, baby..." he mumbled. He saw a small smile cross her face.

Brianna's hand circled his shaft. *Oh, yeah.* Briggs watched her closely. His shaft was so thick that her fingers didn't meet, making him feel a sense of pride in his size. She glanced up at him with that sexy smile of hers. Then very slowly, her tongue eased out and swiped across the wide head of his cock, licking away some clear drops of pre-cum.

Unable to stop himself, he growled and tangled his hand in her hair. "If you're going to suck it, suck it!" He wasn't about to act submissive or show weakness with these women—this woman in particular. If she intended to eat his cock, he wanted her to get on with it. He'd happily come right down her gorgeous throat.

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his ass, not one of hers. He glanced behind him as best he could. The blonde had knelt next to his hip. When her lips touched his ass cheek and her tongue stroked his flesh, he closed his eyes. *Damn.* If this was their chosen form of torture, he'd gladly sign up for more. He looked around for the red-haired woman. She was fiddling with some sort of case on the other side of the room.

Brianna's lips slid over his cock.

"Oh, damn..." He looked down. She'd grabbed his full attention with that move. "More. Take more of my dick. Now." When she complied, sliding her mouth down a good additional three inches, he about lost it.

The red-haired woman suddenly appeared at his side. He jerked, not having seen or heard her walk over, he'd been so focused on Brianna's luscious mouth and seeming eagerness to please him. The redhead held a dildo in her hand and raised the object to his mouth.

"Suck this, Colonel."

He pushed her arm away. He wasn't sucking a dick, fake or otherwise.

"The chemicals we gave you didn't affect you properly," she told him. "You need to do this."

"Get that thing away from me!" He had a woman eating his cock and another woman licking his ass. He saw no purpose in him sucking a dildo.

Brianna released his cock and he groaned in disappointment. *Damn,* he'd been so close to coming. He'd wanted to come in her mouth and watch her swallow every drop of his juices. She rose and took the dildo from the other woman.

As she smiled up at him, her fingers played with the hair on his chest. "There are many parts of this rite that may not appeal to an Earth man, unaccustomed to such ways." Her voice was soft, seductive. "But I guarantee only pleasure." She sucked the dildo into her mouth.

At the sight of her sucking the long object, his cock twitched, ready to explode. He ached so badly.

She slowly pulled the dildo out, then raised her lips to his. Unable to resist, he covered her sensual mouth with his and pushed his tongue inside. Oh, yes! She met him tongue to tongue, and made a sound very close to a purr.

Caressing his cheek, she pulled away, then sucked just on the tip of the dildo, for only a moment, bringing the object closer to his mouth. She licked his lips then licked the fake cock once more, before turning back to him. His tongue eased out to touch hers, needing more of the taste of her. He wanted to fuck her. Now. Needed to fuck her. She angled the dildo and slid an inch inside his mouth.

"That's right, Colonel. Just a little."

Damn, he was doing it. Sucking a cock, albeit a fake one. What was happening to him? She stole all reason from his brain, leading him to do whatever it took simply to get more from her. He tasted...something on the dildo. Heat exploded inside him, different than before.

Brianna nodded to the blonde, who rose from her knees and headed across the room.

From the same case as the redhead had opened earlier, she produced another dildo, a thinner one this time. The blonde turned toward him and slowly approached. "Bend over, Colonel."

Bend over? He eyed the dildo in her hand. What the fuck? "Like hell!"

"It's part of the process, Colonel," Brianna told him. "We need to fuck you anally."

"Too damn bad. You're not fucking me in the ass with that cock, ladies. If you try, you're liable to find it, along with my cock, shoved up your asses."

The blonde backed away, eyeing him warily.

Giving him a look of frustration, Brianna planted her fists on her hips and looked him in the eye. "Why do Earth men whine like babies when it comes to anal penetration?"

Briggs' eyebrows rose to his hairline. "Excuse me? Whine?" He snorted. "I have never whined in my life." Avoiding her gaze, he crossed his arms over his chest. "And I am not a baby," he added in a low voice.

Before she responded, an alarm echoed loudly in the chamber. His gaze met hers, and he wondered what was going on.

She turned to the red-haired woman. "See if you can get in touch with the engineering team that is trying to cut us out of here. Tell them to step up their efforts, even if they have to bypass safety measures."

The female nodded and hit the open button beside the door.

Brianna spoke to the blonde. "If I can get out of here, I'll send Tara down to take my place." She snatched a device off her belt. "Brianna to Command. Reply."

Briggs knew it was now or never. While she was distracted. He lunged forward and grabbed Brianna. He twirled her around, wrapping his arm around her neck.

She dropped the device and it smashed to the floor. "Damn it," she mumbled.

"We're through playing, ladies." After the first initial rush of heat from the taste on the dildo, his mind had been slowly clearing. Apparently he'd fought off the chemicals they'd given him previously and this last set of chemicals had the exact opposite effect of what they'd hoped. Now, he needed to get out of there. He remembered. He knew his mission.

"Let her go!" the blonde ordered. "Now!"

"I believe I'm in control here," he told her. "Back off, or I'll break her neck." A lie, but seemingly an effective one, for the blonde moved away.

Brianna sighed, sounding put out by his words and actions, then her elbow jabbed backward, into his ribs.

Ugh! He doubled over, and before he knew what was happening, she flipped him over her shoulder, onto the bed. *Shit.*

She rubbed her neck. "Not smart, Colonel. I could have thrown you to the floor and injured you. And right now our Healers can't get down here. Remember that."

He grunted, sitting up. Damn it all. His own stupid fault. He'd underestimated her. Well, he wouldn't make that mistake again. The woman was well trained indeed.

"I've got more important things to deal with than your pathetic attempt at escape or whatever your intention might have been." She reached down and retrieved the device she'd dropped on the floor.

"Pathetic?" Yes, he'd gone easy on her, not wanting to hurt her. But pathetic was a low blow.

"He's too clear-headed, Brianna," the blonde replied, hands on her hips.

"So, I see. His Earth physiology, no doubt. How do you feel, Colonel? We are officially at war, and I have troops to command, if you're not in distress."

"War?" Had the countdown begun?

"War. Check his stats," she told the blonde. "If the fever is no longer affecting you, Colonel, I'm postponing this Initiation. I need to check into the project anyhow. Find out why you're really here."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

And that had been that. He hadn't gotten to fuck her, much to his disappointment. But he'd understood then and even more-so now that his mission came first. He would continue with the agreed upon experiments if they still needed his participation. And he'd follow Laszlo's instructions, as were his orders. If it ever came to a choice, his ultimate loyalty would always lie with Earth. Specifically, with the United States military, no matter what.

* * * * *

Brianna scanned the room. The others were already present and seated, crowded around the white oval table in the center.

Laszlo, the leader whom she'd always respected so much but had recently begun to doubt, stood at the head of the table, looking contemplative. Braden, her twin brother and next in command, sat on his right. She spotted Alexa, his breeder-mate, next to him.

Alexa wasn't a Warrior. She wasn't supposed be here. Odd. She should be with her and Braden's newly born triplets. Josella must be watching over them.

Kam, Alexa's half brother, sat next to her. His breeder-mate, Halah, who was Josella's half sister, sat next to him. Pitch, a Class 2 Security Warrior, sat next to Halah.

Erik, next in command after Braden, only one step higher than herself in the chain of command, sat on Laszlo's left. Erik's breeder-mate, Leila, a Healer, sat next to him.

"Sorry I'm late." Brianna headed toward her other brother, Torque, who sat next to Leila. Torque looked in as much pain as she was. More. Tara was his twin. She knew he'd suffered tremendously at her loss, even blamed himself for it. And nothing she'd said to him had made any difference. She feared the loss might even escalate his often unpredictable behavior to new levels.

An empty chair—her chair, she assumed—was situated next to him. She sat down, feeling more than a little unsettled. Nobody spoke, waiting for Laszlo to start the meeting.

"Good. Now that we're all here, we can begin," Laszlo announced. "I regret what this war between myself and Daegal has caused. Over the years, we should have been able to find peace. But how does one negotiate peace with a man who craves ultimate power? The Elder Council did not intend this as the end result of their experiments. No one foresaw the dangers until it proved too late to stop."

"Elder Council?" Braden questioned. "I don't understand. There was another ruling board besides our Xylon Council?"

Brianna had been about to ask the same thing.

Laszlo acknowledged the question with a nod. "The Elder Council was the ruling science, research and development board of Xylon, dissolved long ago. What they created started this conflict. Many generations ago, Xylon's women began losing the ability to reproduce, as you know. Even harvesting women from other planets for breeding purposes, our race slowly began to die out. Unable to discover why our women were becoming more infertile each year, the people turned desperate for a solution."

Laszlo paced the small area between the end of the table and the wall. He rubbed his chin and his icy blue eyes took on a distant look. "Brilliant medical minds, all of the Elder Council members. They came up with the solution. Or so they thought. Super-breeders. Converting some of our still-fertile women into breeders, able to bear multiples with each pregnancy." He paused and glanced briefly at Alexa.

Brianna listened with interest. She knew about Super-breeders, of course. They all did. Alexa was one of them, a half-Earth woman harvested for breeding, then discovered as one of the rare breeders of multiples. Her newborn triplets proved her status.

Brianna's own mother had been a Super-breeder and she herself carried the gene. But the gene lay dormant in her system, so she was not one of the coveted bearers of multiples.

"The first experiments failed miserably," Laszlo explained. "The children produced weren't right, mentally and physically. Not wanting a society filled with what the Council viewed as defectives, they banished the children to the forests in their fifth year."

"Banished?" Alexa echoed, outrage in her voice. "That's barbaric. A certain death sentence."

"They did not die," Laszlo responded with an understanding look. "Not all of them. In fact, those who survived formed a new species."

"A new species? Intriguing." Pitch's eyes intensified and he leaned forward in his chair. "Are you talking about the Def'mal?"

"Yes. The Def'mal—the defective maladjusted ones. The Elder Council had hoped the children would all die, being so young. Then they'd have a relatively clear conscience about what they'd created. Instead, the Def'mal proved quite fertile, ironically."

Brianna listened intently. She'd always believed the Def'mal to be native to the planet. Violent. Unsocialized. Intelligent but totally untamable and unwilling or unable to change. Every attempted negotiation over the years had proven futile, so they were now avoided at all costs. No contact, as decreed by law, for the protection of everyone.

"After years of experimentation, the first somewhat successful Super-breeder was finally created, so to speak, through drugs, DNA and hormone manipulations," Laszlo continued. "Though not perfect, the Elder Council deemed the trial good enough to proceed to the next step. That Super-breeder was my mother."

His mother? Brianna sat stunned and speechless. *Impossible.*

"Wait," Erik interrupted before Laszlo could say more. "Our breeder problems date back centuries. Though rare, there have been successful Super-breeders since —"

"That's right. The Super-breeder experiments had an unexpected side effect. Longevity for those born from the womb of such a female. Isn't it true that I am the only leader all of you have ever known?"

Yes, Brianna answered silently. But the age of a Xylon was hard to identify by sight alone. Xylons looked vital much longer than many species. A Xylon's hair did not normally gray unless it was part of the natural color, and the skin did not wrinkle as much as, say, a human's did, with age.

Laszlo was no longer a young man. Still, he looked quite impressive with his tall frame and long golden hair. His continued presence and leadership weren't out of the line of possibility, at least in her eyes.

Besides, what he said just wasn't possible. If true, his longevity would make him, hell, hundreds of years old. Not all those who grew old and died, well before Laszlo, would have stayed silent before their passing. Stories would have been passed down and remembered by the generations that followed.

"Why do you think there are few to no detailed public records or in-depth history available of Xylon?" Laszlo asked, looking around the table.

When no one else answered, Leila spoke, though hesitantly. "We were always taught that the records had been destroyed in the various uprisings throughout the years. Since no one recreated them, eventually the knowledge became lost."

"No. The Council needed the information covered up. Kept secret. Too much *sin*, for lack of a better term, had been committed – the Def'mal and other atrocities as well."

Laszlo paused and his brow furrowed a moment. "I've been on this planet for more years than I can remember. In power since the last Elder Council member died. I formed the new Xylon Council. Laid out and ordered the construction of the Lair, from where our Warriors would work to keep the planet and system secure. Set up outposts on the various moons. I protected Xylon's secrets and helped our Warriors find breeder-mates. I fought against the Slave Masters and Daegal and built my power and strength as a Healer and as a Visionary. That power is now waning. Not from age but from the side effects of the inherited hormonal and DNA abnormalities."

That's how he must have stayed in power for so long. Through his Visionary powers. Visionaries were rumored to be able to control, in part, the thoughts of others. Maybe even their memories.

Brianna hadn't known he was a Visionary until recently. He'd kept that a secret. At least from the Warriors. Maybe the Council had known.

Was Laszlo's power so strong that he was able to control a whole population of people, along with their perceptions? She vaguely remembered a few cases of insane ranting from people who had eventually disappeared – mysteriously disappeared – after their accusations of control, manipulation, secrecy and lies. Maybe their words hadn't been so insane.

Braden shook his head. "Torque, Brianna, Tar –" He paused, pain crossing his face. "Tara and I were born of a Super-breeder. We're aging normally, with no DNA abnormalities. You are aging too, given the small twitches I've observed in your hands and the dulling of your eye color. You really expect us to believe this wild story?"

"You have not yet reached the age to notice the effects. But soon. Torque, as eldest, will notice the change in his system first. You will still age, just at a much slower rate. We are not immortal."

Torque grunted.

Brianna couldn't remain silent. "How did we not know any of this? No elder Xylons ever passed on the information that you were in power even when *their* elders lived. Not that I know of. Certainly no one in the Koll family ever mentioned it. It's definitely not public knowledge, nor was it taught in our educational or military systems."

"Some things are, or were, better left unsaid," Laszlo responded. "Or maybe unrealized is a better word."

Unrealized? And...? Brianna waited but he said nothing more. She glanced around the table. Nobody else spoke. Whether from disbelief or because they were in shock, she wasn't certain. Their minds were probably reeling as much as hers.

If Laszlo was being honest with them, and she wasn't convinced, she and her brothers would outlive everyone here by a very long time. Alexa's babies would also have long lives, though Alexa would not. She'd seen the realization on the others' faces, when Laszlo had related the news. And their ensuing emotions. Braden had squeezed his mate's hand atop the table as pain filled his features.

"Laszlo?" Alexa asked, her voice sounding unusually scratchy.

"Yes, my dear."

"If Super-breeders were *created* by these experiments and the ability passed down genetically, I'm assuming, how did I become one? My mother was purely human and my father, though a Warrior, wasn't born from a Super-breeder, according to Leila."

"Actually, your father did come from a Super-breeder," Laszlo answered. "That's why I asked you to sit in on this meeting from the beginning. You need to know the truth of how all this started."

"Alexa's paternal grandmother was a Super-breeder?" Leila questioned, a shocked look on her face. "I ran her family history after discovering her genetics. It wasn't in the records. I assumed it to be a medical anomaly. A statistical rarity."

"It wasn't an anomaly," Kam answered for Laszlo. "The data was altered in the record bases."

Alexa looked over at Kam. As did everyone else. "Did you know of this all along?" his sister asked him.

"No. Not all along."

"But you've known long enough to tell us if you'd wanted, I'll bet," Erik said. "Shit. Why am I even surprised?"

"Erik, I asked Kam to keep the secret until the time was right," Laszlo said calmly. "Doing so was not a betrayal of anyone here."

"If the experiments were eventually a success, why aren't there more Super-breeders?" Halah questioned. "Many more could have been created to strengthen the Warrior Society. Why —"

He held up his hand, silencing her and everyone else, who all looked about to speak. "I will address your questions but let me finish this first. It is key and you must know. My mother, the first Super-breeder, gave birth to three boys."

"Triplets?" Braden asked, an uncomfortable look on his face.

"Yes. Myself...along with Daegal and the Other—the man you know as the Top Commander."

Brianna felt nauseous, as if she'd just been punched in the stomach. After announcing his mother's Super-breeder status, she'd known Laszlo must at least have a twin somewhere. But she hadn't expected this.

Erik's face turned red. Torque looked ready to explode, his jaw clenched. Alexa seemed to be having trouble catching her breath. Braden slipped his arm around her shoulders. A wary expression lingered on his face as he studied Laszlo.

Only Kam seemed unaffected by all this and that's when the truth hit her. He'd known about it all, not just about the database changes to Alexa's files, but about the Elder Council, the triplets, all the medical experiments and who knew what else.

"Daegal and the Top Commander are your brothers?" Torque asked in a tight voice. His hand fisted on the table. "You're fraternal triplets, I'm assuming, like Alexa's children."

"Yes. The Other," Laszlo shook his head, "he was never expected to live. He was not given a proper name or even reared with us. Many physical and mental abnormalities existed inside him, so he was kept in medical confinement. After the conflicts began, Daegal broke him out and they rose to power to overtake Marid."

Brianna's mind raced. This was not happening. Too many implications existed if what Laszlo said proved true. She squeezed her thigh, digging her nails into her uniform pants, doing her best to hold her tongue. This could *not* be happening.

"Son of a bitch!" Torque exploded, hitting the table with his fist. "You should have told us before this."

Brianna jumped at Torque's reaction. She expected him to lunge for Laszlo and she wasn't sure whether to try to stop him if he did. But he remained seated. Had he been closer to the man, he might well have tried, given the hard-edged expression on his face.

Seemingly unaffected by the outburst, Laszlo looked around the room, his gaze falling on each of them, one by one. "If Xylon's people had found out at any time over the years, there would have been an uprising. Civil unrest at best. Civil war at worst. I had to protect Xylon from an internal breakdown, which could have given Daegal a foothold to overtake the planet."

"You didn't tell anyone because you would have been stripped of your position and power," Erik accused. "Isn't that the real truth? You'd have been banished from Xylon at best, executed at worst. The Council and the people would have questioned your trustworthiness and loyalty. And the Warriors would never have followed you."

Laszlo's eyes narrowed but he didn't immediately respond to the outburst. Finally he said, in a low but firm voice, "I did what I felt best at the time. For our survival."

"What a pile of—" Erik quieted when Leila covered his hand with hers.

"Given our present situation," Laszlo continued, "you all deserve the truth. And you will hear it. So be still and listen."

Brianna shifted in her seat. How could they ever trust Laszlo again? He could be aligned with his brothers in some elaborate scheme for universal control. He could have *allowed* the destruction of Xylon. If he actually was aligned with his brothers, that would certainly explain all his secrecy over the years.

Her gaze switched to Kam. Given Kam's knowledge and actions, where did his true loyalty lie? She had to wonder now—especially with him mated to Halah Shiota, a Class 1 Warrior of the highest ranking outside a command level, who had once turned on their people and worked for Daegal.

Kam had been initiated to serve as an Agent for Daegal while on the Sand Moon. Supposedly, from something Leila created, they had counteracted the effects. But what if that had been a lie too?

A device had been implanted in Kam's throat by the Slave Masters and Frost. A sonar device that gave him extra power. He'd received it in exchange for information he'd passed on to Frost. But that had been a trap laid by the Warriors so they could gain access to Marid's weapons and security systems.

Leila had neutralized the power source of the device in the medical facility down here to protect Kam. Without proper training, trying to engage the power could have blown out his throat.

However, Leila and Kam were good friends. They could have concocted that whole scenario to secretly allow him to keep a very deadly weapon, which once mastered...

She shook her head. All these questions were driving her mad. She didn't want to believe badly of Kam or Leila or any of them. Still, she felt ill at the thought of how deeply all this deception might truly run.

Chapter Two

Nav-Control Ship FSMF-36, Deep Space

Frost stood by the main navigational control panel and stared down at the insignia she had ripped off a Warrior's jacket years ago. "Braden Koll," she murmured.

Right after he'd received word of a long-awaited promotion, she'd pulled off his old patch to make room for the new one. The rise in prestige had been exhilarating. She'd been elated for her lover. And for herself. Unfortunately, that feeling hadn't lasted. Nor had their tumultuous relationship.

"Such potential wasted. He could have had it all." Instead, he'd sacrificed what could have been for an uncertain future at best. And that future hadn't included her.

Braden had since Branded a DNA-compatible woman from Earth. A Super-breeder. Branding joined two mates for life. They would be able to sense each other's location, know each other's feelings. For months, talk of Braden and Alexa had spread across Marid, even running down through the mining camps and through the Slave Masters' sex camps on the Sand Moon, for the woman was with child.

Braden's mother had also been a Super-breeder, so many were saying that he and his mate would likely produce impressive offspring. Little did they realize just how impressive those children were destined to be.

Their joining had been deemed quite a coincidence, given the rarity of Super-breeders. But actually, probably not a coincidence, from what she had uncovered.

If examined closely enough, one usually could find that more than fate played into the seemingly random events of life. She saw Laszlo's hand all over this joining. One manipulator always recognized another. Or so she'd believed, up until she had become a victim of betrayal herself. Recently, she'd let her guard down. She never intended to repeat that mistake.

Her second-in-command approached. He kept his voice low as he spoke. "We remain on course. What if your assumptions are incorrect? Do you have a backup plan?"

"I always have a backup plan. And my assumptions are not incorrect. Braden and Alexa, as well as several other high-ranking Xylons disappeared before the bombing of Xylon. The missing Warriors still live. To believe otherwise would be foolish on my part. And I'm far from foolish."

"Commander?" a technician interrupted from a nearby station. "I need the communication frequency information."

Frost nodded and her second-in-command turned. Her own thoughts remained focused on her recent discoveries. The Triad would be protected. She knew the secret.

The relationships. And the possibilities, depending on the birth of Alexa's children, which hadn't yet been confirmed. She was working on that and intended to use the knowledge to her advantage. Regardless of Braden's involvement. Any feelings she might have had for him had waned long ago. For the most part.

Still... She couldn't help thinking about what might have been had things turned out differently. She and Braden could have been quite formidable together if his sense of duty hadn't been so strong. He was so well respected, it would have been easy for him to lead an uprising and overthrow not only Xylon's Council but Laszlo as well if he'd had the ambition. In her opinion. When she'd mentioned it seemingly in jest one day to gauge his reaction, he hadn't been amused. She'd known then that things would never work between them.

So one night soon after, she'd stolen top-secret military base codes from him. With the codes, she or whomever she gave them to, would have massive control over the Lair and the planet. It always amazed her how much power and information a woman could attain simply by fucking a man.

After that night, she'd left Braden and aligned herself with Daegal to destroy the Warriors, in exchange for the promise of power. Real power.

However, destroying the planet itself and killing everyone on it had never been her wish. If she'd known Daegal's ultimate plan, would she still have given him the codes? Considering what he'd promised her, she honestly didn't know.

Her second-in-command turned back to her. "The frequencies have been set. Nobody should be able to tap into the system now. What do you think Daegal's true motive was for the annihilation of Xylon? It seems an act of sheer desperation."

"I don't know. And that is bothersome." She felt as if he'd killed a giant sea-spurter with an atomic space torpedo. It would do the job if aimed correctly, but the residual destruction would be excessive.

"Why he's so unwilling to try to adapt to what the future could bring doesn't make sense. All he would have to do is use the knowledge he's gained to his advantage instead of totally devastating every obstacle in his path. More must exist to this than we know."

"That's certainly a possibility," she agreed. Whether Daegal realized it or not yet, his plan of destruction had failed. He hadn't aimed the AST correctly, or in his case, the PowerIIRad bomb. Sure, he'd destroyed most Xylons but not the ones he'd *needed* to destroy. She could almost guarantee it. "Daegal is not unintelligent. Maybe he eventually plans to destroy every moon and planet in the quadrant not under his reign." She shuddered at the thought.

"He must have been tortured as a child. His brain has certainly gotten scrambled somehow. Abuse would at least explain all his evil actions."

People always sought to explain evil. Even with her. Many believed her evil too. But she wasn't evil. She was an opportunist. "Daegal is obsessed. Obviously, he no

longer cares about anyone or anything. Retaliation against whomever he perceives as an enemy is all that fuels him. We need to be cautious. He's already deceived us once."

Recently, she had aligned herself with yet another ally. Someone who could better get her what she wanted after she'd found out the promises made to her by Daegal were less than originally agreed upon.

Instead of settling for only a portion of the power she'd been promised, she would attain and hold all the power that existed in this quadrant of the galaxy and maybe even beyond. Ultimate power. *Yes*. That would indeed be sweet.

As long as she appeared loyal and true and she took things one step at a time, her ambitions would finally be realized. She could do this, for everyone always believed her loyal, even Braden, while she'd been with him. She squeezed the patch in her hand.

But they were all wrong. She would forever be loyal to just one person. Herself.

"The plans are progressing well then? You have yet to inform me of all the details."

"Yes. The plans are moving along perfectly." And she had no intention of telling him or anyone else all the details. She was too smart for that. "Our new ally is more controllable than Daegal. He holds great power. That's all you need to know. Together we will be successful."

Actually, she was the one who would be successful. Once in position, her new ally would be in for a very large shock, for he was only a means to an end. Just like all the others.

She fingered the small remote control device hanging around her neck. Yes, a means to an end. The device she guarded so protectively was connected directly to the implant in Class 2 Warrior Kam Nextor's throat.

He had survived. Somehow. Somewhere.

The device recorded his vital signs. Just not his location. She had techs working on an upgrade now—a special plug-in with a locator designed to home in on the internal tracking chip in his brain, which all Xylons possessed. She'd obtained the frequency code on the Sand Moon during his implant surgery of a sonar device.

She hadn't expected him to escape when he had, otherwise she'd have been more prepared and would already have had the locator in place. She should have known better and not underestimated him.

A beep drew her attention. She shoved the Warrior insignia into her pocket and followed the navigational change that popped up on her computer.

"He's changing course."

"Yes, I see," she said as she studied the screen. Daegal's ships had switched to his final heading. "Send a message for our ships to follow, then recheck the coordinates to make certain we're exactly mirroring his path. I want our cluster of fighters and nav-control ships to simply look like a shadow in space if picked up by his onboard monitoring system."

Her second-in-command nodded and turned on his heel to carry out her orders.

Frost turned from the screen. Daegal was headed for his final target, confident of his success and power. Though armed with more than scout orbiters, he'd still brought only enough ships, weaponry, Agents and Egesa to defeat the planet's military. A mistake. She wondered what humans would think about the Egesa once they saw them in force. The half-lizard, half-humanoid Slave Masters would cause quite a stir, she imagined.

Daegal didn't need to worry about Xylon's Warriors and their military defense fleets interfering, but they were not his only formidable enemy. He just didn't know that. Yet.

Still, she knew from past experience to be extra careful. Not to trust anyone. And certain people raised her warning meter more than others.

As she looked over her current crew, the female Agent sitting at the engineering controls caught her eye and her warning meter spiked to full capacity, like an Egesa's cock during breeder-release. Rave. A former Class 1 Warrior who had turned. She'd worked for Daegal after her banishment from Xylon. Now Rave worked for *her*.

The woman was a Sensor Reader and a valuable asset, even though her powers had waned. Sensors could read emotions. Their abilities, boosted by specially constructed and assigned electronic equipment, made them an asset to any leader. Rave was also a trained Pain Master—a torture specialist. Her talents might come in handy once Frost had Kam in her clutches.

Frost had connected with Kam on the Sand Moon after he left the Warriors to join with Daegal's Agents. She'd considered his switch in alliance a victory but she hadn't gotten much information out of him, beyond what he'd initially promised to provide.

He'd gotten plenty out of her though. He'd set her up, lied to her and sabotaged their main computer systems. He'd been nothing more than a damn spy. He'd played his part well.

Revenge was going to prove tasty indeed.

She had plans for Kam. Eventually, he would take Rave's place. His sensor skills were greater, for his equipment had not been neutralized and stripped as Rave's had. He would be more useful to her in the end. More powerful.

As long as she possessed the controller, she could make him do as she pleased. Not totally, but he'd have a hard time resisting the impulses she intended to send his way. She had a job she needed him to do to solidify her position of power, provided the others lived, as she suspected. Otherwise, she'd have blown the device in his throat as soon as she'd discovered his betrayal.

The sonar device could not be neutralized. It would only appear dormant. And it couldn't be removed without causing Kam's death.

"The Xylons think themselves so smart," she murmured, remembering Kam's time on the Sand Moon. He had undergone a re-initiation to serve as an Agent while there.

Beforehand, he'd been injected with some substance by a Xylon Healer in an attempt to counteract the rite's chemicals. It had shown up on his XBST blood and semen screening, an advanced test recently developed by Daegal's Healers.

The chemicals injected by the Xylon Healer hadn't worked, much to her delight. Though Kam and everyone else would think that they had.

His Initiation and pending switch of alliance was now controlled by a trigger—a trigger that Kam himself would engage at the most opportune moment, or the most inopportune, given one's perspective. This alternate method of Initiation trapped the chemicals from fully entering his system and had been done on Kam so he could remain undiscovered in the heart of the Warriors, once he returned to them as *her* Agent, right where she needed him to be. She chuckled.

If he hadn't betrayed her, he would have knowingly been sent back as a spy, with the device in his throat, masking the chemicals. With him there unknowingly as her Agent, things might take a bit longer but would still work in the end.

"Power is such a rush."

Chapter Three

Planet Xylon

Auxiliary Underground Shelter

Brianna noticed Kam rubbing his throat. A reaction to the stress? Maybe, but her gut feeling about the motion struck her as not good. She would mention it to Braden.

She automatically glanced at her brother and saw him already eyeing Kam closely. He'd noticed. When his gaze shifted to lock with hers, she knew they'd be speaking soon about all this. In private.

The intensity in the meeting room had turned palpable. From the edginess of the others, the shifting and squirming, she knew she wasn't the only one feeling the tension.

"After your Branding ceremony, Braden, the future of Xylon entered a new phase," Laszlo announced, continuing the meeting. "With Alexa being the key."

"Me?"

"Alexa?" several others asked simultaneously.

"Braden, didn't you ever wonder why I told you to take my place and be the lead in her Initiation?" Laszlo asked. "Beyond what I said to you at the time."

Brianna perked up. Initiation rites with harvested women were always carefully planned, well in advance. Changes were practically unheard of.

"You made an off-planet Initiation change?" Pitch asked. "Without Council approval?"

"That's right."

The planetary system had formed a Council of thirteen to prevent any type of military dictatorship from eventually emerging. Brianna wondered though if the Council knew that Laszlo was a Visionary. That would be a good reason for them not to vote against many of his requests. The fear of retaliation—the kind they'd be powerless to stop—would be a good motivator.

"You're determined to control everything and everyone, aren't you?" Erik asked, his voice calmer than his expression indicated.

"I'm determined to do what I believe is right."

Regardless of Xylon law, obviously. After Laszlo left, Braden had taken his place on the Council, then when he'd disappeared, the duty had fallen to Erik. Erik had gone against the Council's orders and done what he'd thought was right on certain key issues, with the full support of most in this room. Was it right to condemn Laszlo but not themselves for acting the same?

"Braden?" Laszlo prompted. "Your thoughts?"

"Yes. I've wondered about the Initiation," he responded. "The Council had selected Alexa for you to mate if emotionally and physically compatible. I thought your excuse not to be involved was flimsy at best."

Brianna couldn't tell by the look on Alexa's face whether she'd known about Laszlo being her proposed mate. Her features remained frozen. For an Earth woman, she held her control more impressively than Brianna sometimes gave her credit for.

"Yes. I suppose my excuse did sound flimsy. There was a reason for that. I was selected by the Council because of my DNA. Though the Elder Council finally stopped the Super-breeder experiments long ago, due to too many mental problems associated with the women and developed later in many of the children—which answers your earlier question, Halah—our more recent Xylon Council voted a partial continuation in the hopes of passing down any remaining active Super-breeder genes from *stable* carriers to children born through the mating process."

Brianna's thoughts turned to her mother. She and Braden had been so young when she'd passed. But she'd heard the stories of her mother's emotional pain and mental instability. Now she knew the truth. Even though the Council was aware of the danger, they'd still proceeded.

Luckily, she and her brothers hadn't been adversely affected mentally from having the Super-breeder gene. But if such problems truly did exist, maybe all "active" Super-breeders found should be restricted from breeding, regardless of Xylon's need for these women. She glanced at Alexa. A harsh punishment, but...

"They hadn't totally given up hope on the old program because some success has been achieved with different women. All this was kept strictly confidential, of course, from the general population. In fact, many of the Super-breeder experiments, in the beginning, had been done and continued on women without their knowledge or consent. It never should have been set up that way but secrecy gave the Council extra freedom."

Brianna's stomach tightened. To do those experiments, any of them, without consent...

"As you know, Braden, you also have the Super-breeder gene from your mother. Her instability gave the Council pause, though, and they hesitated to approve a joining when I suggested it. But I knew you and Alexa were the perfect DNA and emotional match."

Brianna felt Torque's resentment when Laszlo mentioned their mother. And she saw a dangerous darkening in Braden's eyes. Torque had never quite been the same after their mother's passing. He'd turned rebellious and remained deeply scarred to this day.

"What they didn't know was that I kept a secret of my own." Laszlo's gaze switched to Alexa. "I could not initiate or mate with you, my dear, because I am your father. And Kam's."

Their father? Brianna gripped the table. She heard the sharp intake of air from the others.

"No." Alexa immediately shook her head. "I knew my father. Kind of. Enough. He was around from time to time when I was younger. We have the same birthmark. He, Kam and I." Her gaze swung to her brother. "Kam?"

"It's true. What Laszlo said. For too long, I was also fooled and thought our father was..." His voice hitched and he swallowed hard, not finishing the sentence.

"The birthmark was a simple tattoo," Laszlo explained. "A decoy. I have the true mark."

"None of this was indicated in my mother's journal." Alexa sounded confused and more than a little suspicious of his words.

Brianna had her suspicions too.

"We planted the decoy, for you, Alexa. To save your life. She never would have jeopardized you, even in a private journal. If you read back through the pages, now that you know the truth, you'll see the real meaning behind the entries."

Brianna, uncertain of the truth of his words, felt too shocked to even speak, for if accurate, this explained a lot. But it also created many more questions. At least she better understood Kam's loyalty to Laszlo now.

"Only a few knew the secret. For your protection. Daegal would never allow a child of mine to live, especially a female, for reasons I will explain in a moment. As it was, he found out you were a Super-breeder and tried to sterilize you. He obviously knew even before you did, given what happened to you on Earth. If Daegal had known you were my daughter *and* a Super-breeder, no telling the lengths he would have gone to in order to destroy you."

"Like blowing up the planet?" Erik interjected with disgust. "Maybe he does know."

Alexa looked at Braden, a horrified expression on her face. "All this happened because of me."

"No," he replied emphatically. He cupped her cheeks. "You are not responsible for any of this."

"Damn. I'm sorry I blurted that out," Erik said quickly. "Never think that, Alexa. Daegal has been after us for years. He would have done the same thing whether you were on Xylon or not, most likely. He's a madman and everyone knows it. He just finally went over the edge and did the unthinkable."

Brianna felt bad for Erik. She knew how much he cared for Alexa. He'd never intentionally hurt her and true regret showed on his face. She saw Kam move as if to say something too, but then his eyes shifted and he settled back in his seat.

Braden and Erik were both right. Alexa was not to blame. One monster had made this decision. He would be the one to pay.

Laszlo's words suddenly replayed in her head, *if Daegal had known...* Not if Daegal *knew*. Did that mean he hadn't known about Alexa's parentage then but did now? Or was she reading too much into his words?

To do something so drastic simply to destroy an offspring of a brother he considered an enemy seemed insane. But then, so many things involving Daegal seemed insane.

And now that she thought about it, back on Earth, how would Daegal have known about Alexa's Super-breeder status if it wasn't even in their own files? Very little was making sense to her.

"So you're the one who told the Council about Alexa being a Super-breeder but you didn't tell them about her relationship to you?" Braden asked, turning back to Laszlo.

"Yes. I told them that I had received a tip regarding a possible DNA-compatible Super-breeder living on Earth who had an unknown genetic background. After your mother unexpectedly passed, Alexa, I knew the time was right. The Council was given the altered database info—your tracking chip signal code—among other data. I still made certain your files didn't reflect your breeder status. The Council agreed for your protection. I saw to it that a lot of information remained sealed. I don't know how Daegal found out. Kam only knew bits and pieces. I brought him into my confidence because I needed his help. He was told you were his half sister and believed at the time that the decoy—his father—was your father too. Once he got over the shock of thinking his father had mated with another, besides the woman he'd Branded, Kam became intrigued. He agreed to help me in whatever way I needed to protect you."

"Why didn't you marry Kam's mother?" Alexa asked. "I mean, Brand her. Didn't you love her?" She glanced toward Kam a moment but then her gaze switched back to Laszlo.

"Yes I did. Do. Very much. As I did your mother. However, it isn't safe to Brand any woman as my own. It would be a death sentence for her. As well as for any children produced. Daegal would find a way. His evil and hatred are that great."

"Why?" Erik asked. "You still haven't explained what I feel is at the core of all this."

"I will get to it."

"Well, get to it faster," Torque replied.

"It must be difficult. To be condemned to a life alone," Alexa responded, a compassionate look on her face.

"One makes adjustments. Life isn't always as we would wish. Myself, another and the Warrior now mated to Kam's mother initiated her. He fell in love with her too, so I stepped aside...eventually."

"After she got pregnant?" Alexa asked.

"Yes. He raised Kam as his own and then stepped in when I needed him to, after I found out your mother was carrying you."

Brianna didn't know whether to feel sorry for Kam or not. He had been partially informed but also used and manipulated. Blamed, maybe somewhat justifiably by his friends, but at the same time he'd tried to remain loyal to their leader as they'd all been trained to do. And now he was struggling to be loyal to his friends, his family and his duty – all at the same time. A hard position, she would imagine.

Braden shifted in his seat. "I understand Daegal wants all Xylons destroyed, so he can take over this system, as well as others, without interference. Eliminating or sterilizing all Super-breeders and any fertile remaining singular breeders would eventually guarantee that. Especially given his longevity, if what you've said is true. We've known that to be his goal for years. But why is Alexa so special? It has to be more than her being a Super-breeder or just an offspring of yours that he might want revenge on, if that bastard would go to any length to destroy her."

Laszlo paused before responding, then nodded. "Yes it is more. Alexa *is* special. The daughter of one of the siblings in our Triad of Power was destined to give birth to another Triad of Power. For many years, I didn't know from which of us the daughter would come. No children, other than Kam, had been born."

"That you know of," Pitch interjected.

Laszlo's brow furrowed. "Yes," he answered slowly, pausing in thought before he continued. "When I traveled to Earth on a Harvesting Mission many years ago, I met your mother, Alexa. A very special woman." The look on his face softened. "At the time, we were still able to breed with humans who possessed no Xylon DNA. I knew she was the one, so she was initiated and during a breeder-release became with child. Alexa was that child and is the predestined one. Her children are the special births I've been waiting for and Daegal has been fighting against."

"You assumed," Kam interjected in little more than a mumble.

A slight smile crossed Laszlo's face. "Well, yes, technically, that's true. She could have not been the chosen one and another daughter, yet to be born, could have been. If so, she would have simply borne twins. However, I knew. My Visionary abilities are not that weak...yet. Especially when it comes to my own flesh and blood."

"A Super-breeder can have triplets without them being some sort of power triad," Pitch said.

"Not if that Super-breeder is a daughter from a power triad. Your triplets, Alexa, will reign supreme in this system and beyond."

"Supreme?" she whispered, a look of wonder and shock crossing her face.

"How the fuck do you know that?" Torque barked out. "Why do you think you know what's destined to be? Answer our damn questions straight out for once. Where are you getting this knowledge? Or are you just making it up as you go along?"

"Alexa has fulfilled her destiny. That is all that is important now."

"Secrecy breeds mistrust, Laszlo," Braden said in a low voice. "We need to know all there is to know."

Brianna felt more and more uncomfortable the longer this meeting lasted. "What if Daegal or the Top Commander had a secret daughter like you did? Maybe Alexa is not the chosen one."

"It is my belief that Daegal and the Top Commander have, over the years, become sterile. And whoever they attempt to breed becomes sterile, as a result, like with the Egesa Initiation ceremony. Though, that's simply a theory of mine at this point. But it's certainly an important theory if proven correct."

Braden and several others looked over at Alexa, who squeezed Braden's hand tighter. Brianna wasn't certain why. A lot had happened during Alexa's Initiation and her Branding to Braden that Brianna had no knowledge of.

"If they're sterile," Halah began, "they will know Alexa is the chosen one if they ever find out she is your daughter and has borne triplets."

"Are you all really buying this shit-ass story he's spewing?" Torque asked.

"They do know," Kam spoke up, cutting Torque off, before he said anything more. And before anyone else had a chance to answer.

Everyone looked over at him.

"Rave knows. So I think we need to assume that the knowledge is circulating at the Egesa High Command or Daegal's military facility in the Dome on Marid."

"Rave!" Torque barked.

"How did Rave find out?" Braden asked. "If Daegal and the Egesa know about Alexa, that's not information they'd make available to everybody. Rave is not exactly a part of their inner circle. She simply helps them with their dirty work."

"Maybe *she's* the one who told *them*," Erik suggested. "And not the other way around."

Everyone looked to Kam for a response.

"She's a Sensor Reader. She could have indeed picked up on the situation...from me." His face took on a pained expression.

"How?" Torque asked. "A Sensor Reader isn't a damn psychic. Unless you told her."

"Exactly," Erik replied.

Kam's gaze briefly met Torque's, then switched to Erik as he spoke. "I didn't tell her. You know me better than that."

"I thought I did," Erik replied.

"Sensors pick up many things. Emotions reveal more information than you might think. Once you understand how to interpret them."

"That's pretty damn specific information," Erik shot back.

"Yes. That's true. Rave was stripped of her wrist sensor and other equipment long ago, so her natural abilities cannot be overly strong after all this time without mechanical aid. Since Daegal has a way of knowing a lot of our secrets, he could very

well have already known everything at that time and Rave somehow found out from him or his people.”

“Makes you wonder how he’s getting the information though, doesn’t it?” Erik suddenly asked, looking at Kam with a narrowed gaze. “Ow!” He jumped and glanced sharply at Leila. “What?”

“Stop being an ass. Kam would never put his sister or those babies in danger and you know it.”

Kam ignored the exchange, looking around the table at the others. “Rave didn’t specifically mention Alexa but she said she knew I was close to the Triad of Power.”

“She was simply referring to your loyalty to Laszlo,” Halah said. “That had to be it and makes sense.”

“I think it was more than that.”

“Halah has to be right,” Alexa said. “Even if Rave knows about Daegal’s relationship to Laszlo and somehow about me being Laszlo’s daughter, I hadn’t even given birth yet when you and Halah were on the Sand Moon. There was no way anyone could have known about the triplets. Even Leila thought I was having twins right up to the end. The most Rave could have done was suspect the possibility or pick up on what you felt might be a possibility, given what Laszlo had told you.”

“I’m telling you that I sensed something more. Besides, I’m close to Laszlo but certainly not to Daegal or the Top Commander. Why would she say I was close to the Triad, implying all three, if she wasn’t referring to the babies?”

His gaze briefly fell on Erik, almost as if daring him to make a negative comment. When Erik remained quiet, Kam seemed to relax. Or rather, he looked deflated, Brianna thought.

“It’s also possible she said the *next* Triad of Power. Or maybe I just got that feeling from her.” Kam shook his head. “I don’t remember.” He looked down at the table and his hands fisted. “I really don’t remember. My headaches have affected my brain. My memories.”

Alexa touched his shoulder. He unclenched his fingers and reached up, covering her hand with one of his. They exchanged an emotional look.

Though Brianna often saw caring for Alexa in his eyes, she still wondered at Kam’s words, given his unstable brain waves. He suffered from severe headaches due to his mixed-race genetics. She wondered how severe the damage might become and worried greatly about him.

“Maybe she doesn’t really know anything at all. Maybe she was just fishing for information,” Alexa speculated. “Besides, won’t they think we’re all dead now? Won’t they think I died before even giving birth?”

“Perhaps,” Laszlo replied. “But Daegal will learn otherwise soon enough.”

Laszlo was right. Once they got off Xylon—if they did—they'd be traveling with the triplets. Their existence would eventually become known no matter how hard they tried to conceal themselves and the babies.

Brianna wondered if Laszlo had already known about Rave's awareness of the Triad of Power. He hadn't reacted when Kam broke the news. Nor had he reacted when Alexa had blamed herself or when Kam had sounded so distraught.

She didn't understand Laszlo. She knew he had deep feelings for Xylon, their Warriors and certainly he must for his own children as well, for she'd seen those feelings come to the surface from time to time. But he could appear completely disengaged and cold at times too.

"We will protect the babies," Laszlo spoke. "They are a threat to Daegal's power. They must survive for Xylon's people to survive. For other free systems to survive. We are the only ones who can ultimately defeat Daegal and the Slave Masters' evil ways. Daegal knows that and will fight us any way he can. These babies will be strong. They will attain great powers and become a Reign of Three."

"For the good of all," Alexa added, her voice sounding less assured than normal. "Right?"

"So we hope. So we hope."

Laszlo's answer didn't reassure anyone, given the look on everyone's face. If the current Triad of Power contained good and evil, would Alexa's babies fulfill the same future?

"In the meantime, we must stop Daegal from reaching his next target."

"His next target? Sunevia or Tamara or maybe one of the outer planets?" Brianna questioned. She hated to think of the Slave Masters getting control over their closest allies.

"He and the Egesa will have already secured all the planets in this quadrant. Or will be in a position to do so before they can be stopped."

Her heart lurched. Could that be true? So quickly.

"Our remaining Warrior forces are too scattered right now to help those planets, especially without proper leadership. Not until we regroup. Marid War Fleets will take full advantage while they can. Hopefully our people will at least retain control of our moon-based outposts which are a priority, otherwise we are certainly doomed. I was actually referring to Daegal's main target. One he must get under his control first or he cannot survive."

"What planet or system are you talking about, Laszlo?" Pitch asked.

"Earth."

Chapter Four

*Planet Earth, State of Colorado, U.S.A.
Underground Tracking Facility*

"Oh!" Jaeda Spargo shrieked as the man threw her down on the bed.

His large frame immediately covered hers, imprisoning her beneath him. He ripped off the short, silk robe she wore, exposing her naked body to his lust-filled gaze.

"No wait!"

He fumbled with the front of his pants, finally tearing them open with a growl. His knees spread her thighs but his pants prevented him from moving as he obviously wished. "Damn it!"

When her hands came toward him, he grabbed her arms and held her down. His mouth took one of her bare breasts and he sucked hard.

Jaeda gasped and struggled against his hold. Her heart pounded harder than she could ever remember. She felt the pull of his lips straight down to her pussy. "Ah!"

His fingers tightened around her upper arms. He bit down on her nipple, chewing on the fleshy nub.

"Oh...ah!" She jerked and whimpered. "Yes!" Desire, not fear, rolled through her. For she knew...she was dreaming. She almost always recognized a dream as a dream. Since she was a child she'd been able to control her nightly visions. Well, mostly. This dream was always a bit different. Still within her control but barely, which scared and excited her at the same time.

She didn't know the name of her nightly male visitor. He had made her dreams a pleasure since she'd started working on Project ACE for the U.S. military.

At first, she'd thought there might be a connection. Now she had her doubts. He wasn't anyone involved with the project or anyone she'd ever met or even any sort of celebrity. She didn't know how her mind had conjured him up. Frankly, she didn't care. She was just determined to enjoy the erotic ride.

His tongue circled her nipple, soothing the skin. When he bit down on the nipple again, harder this time, she shrieked, the pain-pleasure was so intense. "Yes..." she sobbed.

Her dream man was tall, muscular, commanding and too arrogant for his own good. She liked that. Long black hair, dark eyes and something else...some secret, hidden deep. A Roman gladiator or a Viking soldier came to mind. Something more than an ordinary man, for certain. And so incredibly sexy her mouth watered and her pussy ached from just one look at him.

He released her breast. "Fuck! You're driving me crazy. Spread your legs wider."

Only too happy to comply, she did as ordered, offering her pussy to him. She'd wanted more control earlier, which was why she'd struggled. But then she'd decided not to protest and to just let him have his way tonight.

Sometimes, when he got that certain hard intensity in his eyes, she made the conquest harder for him. He seemed to enjoy sex on the rough or forceful side on occasion, though he always remained careful never to actually hurt her.

His commanding presence proved ultra sexy to her but it was the opposite side of his personality that fascinated her the most, for she knew he could be gentle when he wanted. More than once he'd simply held her. Or whispered words of love and caring into her ear. And at times he would kiss her so tenderly that she felt like crying.

He stroked his cock so she could see. Huge. A dark reddish-purple, with a wide head and the shaft veined to perfection. Much bigger than any man's cock she'd ever seen. Incredibly long and thick. She doubted most women could get more than half the head into their mouth. *Not human...* The thought struck hard but she dismissed it, too turned on to dwell on such a supposition.

He knew how to use that massive tool of his too. That's all she cared about right now. Not like those men who always bragged, then couldn't deliver. She'd known too many of those. Truthfully, she rarely found complete sexual satisfaction with her partners. But with him, whether gentle or aggressive, he gave her more pleasure than she'd ever experienced in her life.

In fact, she often woke right in the middle of a powerful orgasm, screaming or sobbing in ecstasy, her pussy quivering along with the rest of her body. Good thing the walls in the facility's staff quarters, where she worked and resided most of her days, were soundproof. How a dream could give her such satisfaction she had no idea. But this dream man was quickly spoiling her taste for any flesh-and-blood males in her real life.

Despite his almost violent actions earlier, he eased his cock into her with a slow glide, until every inch was deeply embedded in her pussy, filling and stretching her so much that she marveled at the deliciously tight fit.

"Ah..." His low growl of satisfaction filled her ear. "You belong to me, Jaeda," his voice rumbled deeply. "Say it."

Her whole body trembled at his words. She'd remember that sexy tone for the rest of her life.

"Say it," he insisted, his tone so commanding she ached to obey.

"I belong to you," she whispered, her voice husky. Normally, she would bristle at saying such a thing. She was fiercely independent and accustomed to being the one in charge. But this was one man she wanted to belong to. Submit to.

His eyes locked with hers. A small smile—a possessive smile—crossed his face.

As he pumped his cock into her pussy, she wrapped her legs around his large frame, hanging on for all he could give her, meeting his increasingly powerful thrusts with her own. Her breath came out in short pants. "I'm going to come!"

"Oh yeah," he groaned. "I love it when you say those words to me. I'll fuck you so good that you'll never want another man."

She had not a doubt that he would fuck her better than any other. He always did. And she feared he was right, for already she found it hard to even think about wanting another man.

From his moans and groans, she knew that he was close to coming too. She loved giving him pleasure as much as being on the receiving end and she wanted the feeling to go on forever.

Never leave me. The unexpected plea wafted through her mind and she wasn't certain if it came from her or him.

When their gazes again met, she admitted the truth to herself. Her mind and her body needed this man desperately, as much as she needed air and food.

A flutter began around her clit and her muscles tensed. "Oh...ohhh!" The orgasm slammed through her, gripping her in such ecstasy that she felt she might die from the intensity of the pleasure.

He thrust his cock hard, almost savagely, into her cunt. "Fuck, yeah!" His pupils dilated. He tensed and his cum exploded into her in what seemed like an unending stream. "Ahh...ahh!"

Her fingernails dug into his arms. "Yes! Yes!" She clung to him. Their bodies remained locked until they were both completely drained of energy and cum.

His lips touched her cheek in a long, slow kiss that had her melting. Gradually he slid down her body to leisurely lick at her nipples, first one then the other. Lingered. Savoring. Regenerating. She loved this quiet time together, after coming, for she felt that's when they grew emotionally closer, even when no words were exchanged.

In a matter of moments though, she felt a difference between them and sexual tension began to grow once again. In her body and in his. He placed hot kisses over her ribs and down her stomach. When he inched lower, she spread her legs.

"Is that an invitation?" he asked.

"Do you need an invitation?" she countered.

A sexy smile crossed his face. He pushed her legs wider and spread her pussy lips with his fingers. He lowered his head, his attention on her clit. Swirling licks, causing her back to arch in pleasure. He sucked the plump bud into his mouth, drawing with his lips until she squirmed beneath him.

Before she came, he raised his head. When she frowned, he chuckled. "Did you want to come?"

"Asshole."

"I've been called worse." He flipped her over on her stomach. "But since you mentioned it..."

"Oh!"

"Head down, ass up."

She thought he was going to fuck her pussy from behind, but instead she felt him lubricating her ass with her own juices and his saliva, plunging first one then two fingers into her, stretching her, preparing her.

"You're too big!"

"Too bad." He smacked her ass. "You'll love it."

The wide head of his cock stabbed at her entrance, as his fingers gripped her cheeks. She breathed deeply, aroused beyond belief, curious to know how it would feel to have such a huge cock filling her ass.

He pushed forward and the tip went in. "Ah, yeah."

"Oh! Yes!" It burned slightly, but felt so incredibly exciting at the same time. "More!"

He growled and pushed the head of his cock all the way in. When she gasped, his fingers tightened on her cheeks almost painfully.

She pushed her ass back against him. "All of it!"

"Fuck!" He grabbed her hips and plunged his shaft as deep as he could get it.

Jaeda screamed and grabbed the sheet in her fists.

He fucked her hard and fast. Grunting. Groaning. He wrapped one arm around her waist, then reached under her and rubbed her clit.

She thrashed and cried out as she came. She couldn't stop coming and lost count of the orgasms.

He pushed her down flat on the bed as he came in her ass. "Oh, hell yes! Damn! You're incredible." He jerked against her several times then collapsed on top of her.

She breathed heavily and her heart was beating so fast she thought it would come out of her chest. Too bad none of this was real. She had actually begun to resent her waking hours—the hours that took him away from her for far too long.

She turned her head and licked his ear until he groaned. His cock grew hard inside her once again and she sighed in delight.

Yes. Her perfect match.

An alarm chirped, bouncing off the walls and penetrating Jaeda's brain like a bug she couldn't smack the life out of or swat away.

She cracked open one eye at the irritating sound. "Shit." A facility alarm. She reluctantly opened her other eye, hating to leave her sexy dream man. But she knew he'd be waiting for her when she returned, or so she hoped, which gave her a sense of expectation far greater than anything she'd experienced in a long time. In fact, the intensity she felt for that man, a figment of her imagination, frightened her a little. And fascinated her a lot. Not many things in life frightened or fascinated her.

Maybe she should take some time off. She'd been majorly overworked lately and was in need of a long-overdue vacation. Then she could sleep all day if she wanted. *And indulge in a real fucking frenzy with my well-endowed hunk.* She couldn't help but smile at

the tantalizing thought, wondering if he'd be with her now for eternity. If not, she would greatly miss him once he was gone. Her smile faded. Better not to think of that.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. The red digital numbers blinked nauseatingly at her. She needed to eat but her evening shift was approaching. She'd have to settle for an energy bar at her station...again. As the warning still sounded through the speaker system, she yawned in disinterest.

"Damn techs," she whispered in aggravation and pushed herself up to sit on the side of her cot. She stretched languidly, in no hurry to report, even though she was in charge of the tracking facility and was required to code in a status file for each alert.

It couldn't be that important. If it was serious, her crew would contact her directly or issue a higher alert. She'd code the status within the hour, more than soon enough for the low-grade alarm.

Normally, she wouldn't take her duties so lightly but the tracking crew lived for alerts and issued one at the drop of a hat. Just a few days ago, they'd thought a message was being received from deep space. It turned out to be a test signal from their own sub-Atlantic sister facility.

Not a mistake of incompetence exactly but more a mistake of over eagerness and not staying current on scheduled tests. With one additional check, they could have distinguished the true source. Instead, they'd issued an alert and then gone through the standard checklist system, causing much more chaos than was necessary. Not to mention a ton of paperwork and database updates for her.

She stood and pulled on her navy-colored jumpsuit uniform and black boots. She tied her long black hair back into a ponytail and strolled out into the corridor. She'd long forgone wearing make-up. She didn't have the time or inclination to bother.

People rushed back and forth, to and from their stations. In spite of too many alerts, she always enjoyed the energy and enthusiasm at the facility. It kept things interesting.

She passed a control panel, stopped and backtracked. Damn. She'd forgotten to check for any current staff bulletins from their above-ground comm facility. She should have done so from her quarters but her mind had been elsewhere. She needed to get her thoughts off her sexy mystery man and on to her job. Easier said than done, given one was much more interesting at the moment than the other. Standing at the panel, she scrolled through the various screens. Nothing new. Good.

The chirping alarm abruptly stopped. "Thank you," she whispered, grateful for the respite. Why they felt the need to run an alert signal for so long was beyond her understanding. Unfortunately, that was one of the things she had no say about, regardless of how much she'd complained.

Unexpectedly, the sound reemitted but changed to a shriek this time. Everyone stopped in their tracks and looked toward the speakers, including Jaeda. That was a Priority Alarm. The first issued since she'd been on the project. Her stomach clenched.

"Get going, people!" she ordered as she trotted toward the elevator. "This better not be some sort of facility test," she mumbled. If so, it was unscheduled and that would piss her off because she was supposed to be informed of all such tests.

No announcement followed the alarm, which meant it had to have been generated automatically by the system. *Not a test.* They'd gotten an unauthorized or unlogged hit from deep space. Her heart rate sped up.

She punched a button on the wall, her nerves going from nonexistent to on edge in a matter of seconds. A moment later an elevator door slid open. Kirk Logan, one of her few true friends at the facility and a co-worker—the supervisor next in charge after her—stood inside.

"What the fuck is going on?" he asked. "That's a priority."

"Hell if I know." She rushed inside, slapped the close button and pressed the level that would take them to the deepest and most secure part of the facility. She clicked on the intercom. "This is Spargo, report."

"I've tried that. It's still not working."

She slapped the grating. "Piece of crap! Why can't they get anything down here fixed?" The elevator comm system had been inoperable for weeks now. Just one thing on a list longer than her arm that needed fixing, upgrading or total replacement.

"Too many budget cuts."

The standard government line, which she'd grown weary of hearing long ago. "I hate politics. Correction—politicians." They always seemed to be swimming in more wealth than they needed or knew what to do with. There was plenty of money to be spent, in her opinion. It's just that the wrong people had their hands on it.

"Hard to get funding for a nonexistent operation and facility."

"Nonexistent, my ass. They're cheap fuckers is all." And that was being kind. They thought they were invincible, which was the problem. Otherwise, they'd put their funds where they should before disaster struck, rather than after.

Kirk chuckled. "You do have a way with words, boss."

"Little good it does," she mumbled, wishing the higher-ups would listen more closely to her words. That's why she was here, after all. To track and to advise.

Maybe they'd made a mistake. Or she had. Maybe she never should have taken on this project. Too many of the decision-makers here seemed more interested in her breasts than in her brains anyhow. Irritating to say the least, especially since she understood the seriousness of this project. If she hadn't been specifically chosen...

It seemed like forever before the elevator door finally slid open. The ding announcing their arrival immediately put her back into work mode. She and Kirk rushed out and into the tracking center. They both headed in different directions.

Jaeda came up on a group of men and women, huddled around the main tracking monitor and hardware system. "Fill me in. What's going on?"

"We've got a K-blip in deep space."

She frowned, suddenly confused. "That can't be all it is." She'd thought they had received a confirmed threat. A simple K-blip wouldn't trigger a priority alert. K-Blips were quite common, even at long range, and came mostly from known entities. Or if not, they were generally at such a distance that they did not pose a threat or cause for concern. Something more had to be going on. The computer wouldn't have issued the alert otherwise. "Why'd the computer key in a high-level alert on it?"

"The object is tracking beyond the normal satellite orbits and space paths. It's not a logged known asteroid or other natural mass. It appears on a direct path and metallic in nature."

"Metallic?" The urgency in his voice and further details piqued her interest. "No comm signal has accompanied it?" Which would indicate the blip had originated from a known civilization or friendly entity and not someone who could prove to be an enemy.

"None," Kirk called out. "Not that the probes are picking up."

"Something from one of the space agencies then? Ours or from one of our alien contacts who's running a secret project we don't know about yet?" Secret space projects were common—secret from the general population and other agencies. However, their facility had always been informed of such projects in the past because of the advanced tracking equipment and communications abilities of the center. Other than continental shuttle launches, satellite auto-repair robots, space missile tests and the normal alien supply ship route activity, all should be quiet out there right now from the intel she had.

"How secret can it be? There's no way we wouldn't pick up on this thing. It's huge. We would have been informed by the brass. There!" A technician pointed to the screen as the signal once more registered on the tracker.

That didn't look like a K-blip to her. Her eyes narrowed as she stared at the screen. "It's definitely large."

"Large? It's gigantic," Kirk responded again from across the room. "Getting specifics now."

"Are you sure it's metallic, not natural?" she asked, trying to figure out the computer's reasoning for its classification of the object.

"It's definitely not a natural formation from what I've compiled so far. It's either metallic or something of a similar grade. It's on a direct, plotted course," another tech chimed in.

"That's the second time you've said direct, people. We don't know that yet. I'll need verification from the computer in my hand. Get me coordinates and a trajectory." It sure looked like a programmed line of direction from the history she was reviewing but she wasn't about to jump to conclusions. Yet. "Let's make absolutely certain. Who else will be picking this up?"

"Nobody at this distance," Kirk said. "But if it keeps up current speed and the projected course—I'm approximating from what data we do have—the space agencies will begin tracking within ninety-six hours or so."

This underground facility was the most sophisticated on Earth, with advanced technology. Highly protected and constructed using secret alien technology. Nobody picked up deep-space tracking before they did. Not even their sister facilities. "Okay. Transfer the data to my station." She rushed over and sat down in front of her computer screen. To her it didn't appear as a single object. It almost looked like two clusters of –

Shit! Her heart rate kicked up at least three more notches. She automatically slipped on her communication headphones. She keyed in a few commands and began studying the data, frantically making notes as she went along.

"Damn it!" Kirk shouted from his station. "Boost power. Now!"

Her head snapped up.

"We've lost the signal. It vanished in a snap, like someone flipped an off switch." He punched several control pads, a grim look on his face.

She checked her own panel. Yep. Definitely gone. "Did you save what we already received?"

"Did you really need to ask me that? Transferring the remaining data to your station now."

"Check all tracking programs for any malfunction," she ordered. "I want a full system diagnostic. We need this verified. Keep monitoring in case it reappears. Pull resources from our other facilities if necessary. This stays with us until we're certain that we were tracking something real and not some computer-generated ghost."

She saved what data they had from her station and transferred a copy of the file to the network set up in her personal quarters, so she could work on the file after hours. Even from what little they'd gathered, she knew the computer would be able to track the object or objects' ultimate destination, provided it maintained course. And its arrival time, provided it maintained speed.

Trying to figure out where the signal could have originated from, she tapped her chin. If it was a targeted project, then the signal had been cloaked to disappear like that. Which meant really bad news. A purposeful act to disguise an approach. And if it was headed for Earth...

She had cautioned everyone not to ignore the signs. The brass had rejected their intelligence, her theories and what others in the field knew and had warned was the inevitable. Alien invasion.

Why they even kept her around if they weren't going to listen to her, she didn't know. Why they kept this facility operational, she didn't know. Just to see it coming? To wait until it was too late, then pretend surprise with the public? In this case, she prayed they were right and she was the one off base.

While she waited for answers, her stress level maximized and remained high. It wouldn't ease off until she knew for certain what they were dealing with. And maybe not even then.

"Come on, come on," she muttered, tapping the computer screen, eager to find out as much information about what they'd tracked as possible. The computer was working on the calculations. Too damn slowly for her satisfaction. She did not like the look of this.

Another alarm sounded. A deep comm alarm. Only the crew in this room was privy to that particular warning. She flipped a switch to check the comm channels. What the hell was going on today?

"Jaeda?" Kirk called out. "I've got it on DPCM Frequency 135."

"What is it?" she asked as she switched over. "Is it coming from the blip?"

"No, but it's definitely an incoming message. Computer is identifying—bingo! As I suspected, given the long-range frequency. It's ACE."

Finally. They'd been out of contact for far too long. Her comm feed crackled, then nothing. Damn it. Her panel was down. Fucking equipment. She clicked on her headphones. "Save it, transfer the stream to me, I'm silent again, and patch me in to General Adair." A coincidence that ACE was transmitting at the same time they'd picked up this large cluster? Doubtful.

Chapter Five

Nav-Control Ship FSMF-36, Deep Space

Frost turned from the navigational panel when she heard the clunk of boots headed her way. Rave. She was approaching with a confident stride and a serious look.

Rave acted too secure in her position, as if she knew secrets no one else did. Frost fingered the controller dangling from the chain around her neck, making certain it still hung there, knowing the little device would secure her future. She wanted Rave out and Kam in. Soon. Having a strong male by her side would make victory all the sweeter. A male she had complete control over. A male who would turn on his own love, family and people to serve her. In bed and out. Yes. Sweet revenge.

"Daegal's fighters are now cloaked," Rave informed her. "I've cloaked our ships in response. Daegal is overly cautious, cloaking sooner than necessary. Earth's equipment is not sophisticated enough to track us this far out."

Frost took close heed of her words. "Maybe he suspects someone is following him."

"I doubt it. He would have engaged in evasive maneuvers. The probe I sent out didn't register any major space displacement."

"Can we still mirror his ships or will we need to stay farther back and move into a new space lane to avoid detection?" She knew how to navigate many types of ships but some of the specifics of cloaking were still new to her because the ability had only recently been added to her vessels.

"As long as we continue receiving coordinates from our contact, we can safely maintain our present position."

"The coordinates shouldn't be a problem." As soon as the words left her mouth, a stab of doubt pricked at her. Over the years, she'd learned caution was her friend. Luckily she was prepared.

She knew how to think fast on her feet when she needed to. She knew Daegal's destination. She just needed to stay a safe distance away to avoid detection, which was why she needed to know his coordinates at all times.

She didn't want to trigger a collision alarm. Though it was a common occurrence between cloaked ships, Daegal might fire weapons instead of simply adjusting his course, as was standard procedure. Especially if he checked on their identity—again standard procedure—and suspected her ships were part of an "unfriendly" fleet.

They should simply look like supply vessels to anyone who accessed their official log. She'd ordered all their regular fleet markings removed and entered a false identity and destination into the USLM system, an automated universal monitoring station for space traffic. But Daegal wasn't a man easily fooled.

She did have a backup plan if everything suddenly blew up in her face. Her ships were heavily armed. She was prepared to sacrifice whomever or whatever she had to in order to survive.

"How is the upgrade progressing?" Rave asked, motioning toward the remote control device around her neck.

"Slowly." Actually, the plug-in tracker was almost complete but Rave didn't need to know that. She'd shown too much interest in the device and Kam for her liking.

Frost knew Rave had aspirations of her own. But there was no way that Rave would ever eclipse her in power. Nor would Kam ever be under the woman's control. That particular Warrior's knowledge, power and cock would serve *her*...and her alone.

* * * * *

Planet Xylon
Auxiliary Underground Shelter

With his heart pounding and every muscle tensed, Briggs sat on the hard bench in the alien underground shelter. He returned the communications device to his boot and secured the small compartment. He sighed in relief. Nobody had caught him transmitting.

For some odd reason, the thing wouldn't switch on in the central bathroom—or whatever they called it—down here, which would have been perfect and private. Perhaps the positioning of the metal and electrical equipment had something to do with it, for he also hadn't been able to transmit from the lower level, which housed various mechanical machinery and power sources.

He'd checked out this underground shelter as best as he could, on more than one occasion. Someone always seemed to be up and about, even at night, so he'd had to be careful not to look as if he were doing anything suspicious. This was the only really private time he'd been able to find, while almost everyone was in the meeting. At least it was done.

He had no idea if they'd confiscate the communication device if they found it on him but he didn't want to take the chance. Every possible advantage for Earth was important, so he did not feel bad about the secrecy. He just hoped the signal and the message he'd sent had gone through unhindered.

As he'd sat there transmitting the data to the tracking center, it all had hit him at once—the monumental burden of his responsibility, of his very possible failure. All this was so much more than just another assignment. He'd been separated from his kind and sent on an alien mission to ensure Earth's survival. "Fucking geez," he whispered.

Part of his job was to learn whatever he could about the Xylons and report back. Even after being here only a short while, he'd already found out quite a lot. Although alien, Xylons looked perfectly human. He'd been told that differences existed but he

hadn't seen anything of significance. When they spoke, he understood their English perfectly. His ego wasn't so large as to rank Earth and his own native language as the foundation on which every other civilization in the universe was based, so he'd asked Brianna about it. Though some of them did indeed speak English, among other tongues, according to her, their own language auto-translated into whatever foreign ear was in range via signals sent to the brain based on known genetic markers. Quite a scientific accomplishment.

One of the other things that had greatly piqued his interest was that breeding between Xylons and humans was possible and had been taking place for centuries. In fact, for the last several years, they'd often harvested females from Earth for breeding purposes, from what Pitch and Brianna had told him. His superiors would definitely be interested in that information.

Of course, if they were snatching or impregnating women against their will, he doubted they'd inform him of that. Perhaps some of the alien abduction stories on Earth had a basis in fact after all.

After his stay in the Lair, he'd already known that sex between Xylons and humans wasn't a problem. Since then, he'd desperately wanted a taste of an alien female. Not just any alien female of course. Only Brianna. Thoughts of her kept him warm at night and sane during the day.

He ached to see her naked, to find out what any physical differences might be and to sate his hunger for her. Then at least he'd have that special memory once they parted ways.

He shook his head, dismissing the thought that he might never see her again after they got out of here. Somehow that possibility bothered him more than he'd expected. More than it should.

The stress of everything had exhausted him and was making him feel more compassion for these people than was prudent. His eyelids felt heavy and his chin dipped to rest on his chest.

As soon as he began to drift off, the visions came to him as they did almost every time he closed his eyes. Visions of Brianna.

He no longer tried to push the visions away as he had in the beginning. Why should he? He wasn't some robot.

At first he'd thought the sexual visions odd, the way they repeated over and over, as if they weren't really his own but instead were, well, implanted maybe. A strange thought, he knew. He'd watched one too many science fiction flicks in his time, he supposed. Soon enough though, he'd changed his mind about the fantasies, and though often problematic or even awkward during the day, he sought them out each night.

He wondered what Brianna's pussy really looked like. He needed to know. Beyond his fantasies. He swore that before his mission was complete he'd find out first hand how a Xylon pussy truly looked, felt and tasted. And how deeply his cock would fit inside.

In his fantasy, she smiled enticingly at him as she slowly peeled the uniform down her body. In the visions, they never had anything on underneath their uniforms or on their feet. At the sight of her bare body, his cock hardened.

Her full, pale breasts made his mouth water. The rose-colored nipples would taste exquisite in his mouth. He knew that without a doubt. He wanted to suck them until she squirmed with as desperate need as he.

His gaze slid lower as he admired her body, doubting that he'd ever tire of the sight. Her stomach had a slight curve to it but was otherwise flat. He'd love to drag his lips across the soft-looking flesh, then ease lower and lap at her cunt until she came.

He wondered what sounds she made when she climaxed. And how loud he could make her scream in ecstasy.

Her uniform dropped to the floor and she stepped out of it. Ah, yes. She looked lusciously human in his mind. He couldn't rip his eyes from her pussy. He saw the moisture in her dark curls. Yes. She wanted sex. She wanted him.

He wouldn't disappoint her. He'd fuck her until she was completely sated and couldn't move.

His gaze dipped down her body, examining the rest of her. Her legs went on forever. Even her feet looked sexy to him. Standing there naked, her long brown hair flowing over her shoulders, the bottom of the strands teasing her nipples, her piercing green eyes begging for his touch. He couldn't resist her.

He stood and stepped forward, ready to take her. To fuck the hell out of her. She stopped him with a hand to his chest before he could drag her into his arms for the kiss he craved. He arched an eyebrow.

Brianna's fingers slowly pulled down the zipper of his uniform. "I want you naked too," she purred.

His cock twitched at her words. He loved her voice. Sexy. Strong, but all feminine at the same time. A woman who knew what she wanted.

He knew what he wanted as well, what he had to have. *Her. Now.* He quickly shucked his uniform and kicked it aside.

She eyed him from head to toe. Her gaze stopped at his cock and a small smile crossed her face. She ran her tongue along her lower lip and he saw her pupils dilate slightly.

That did it. That hungry, feminine look made him feel like "hunk of the universe". Damn, his cock ached to be inside her pussy. When younger, he'd been quite the player. He knew how to fuck a woman and make her beg for more. He'd been nicknamed "Ramrod" for more than one reason.

Though a hard and fast fuck wasn't his only skill. He liked a soft and slow seduction just as much. He wondered which one Brianna favored.

He'd grown up emotionally and settled down physically quite a bit since his wild days. Now he preferred women who affected him on a deeper level. The sex was so

much more powerful, he'd learned. He reached for Brianna, yanking her into his arms. Her startled laugh felt as good as her warm, soft flesh. Her nipples pressed against his chest and he groaned.

His lips found and covered hers and when she opened her mouth his tongue plunged inside, tasting and exploring her. Sweet and smooth as honey. Just as always. Would her cunt taste just as good?

He felt her reach between their bodies. When her fingers circled his cock, he almost lost it. He tore his lips from hers. "If you pump me even once, I swear I'm going to come in your hand."

"No. Not in my hand." She cocked her head at him, then dropped to her knees in front of him. "In my mouth." She squeezed and massaged his shaft.

"Fuck." His balls hurt like hell. He plunged his fingers into her hair, barely able to control himself. If that's what she wanted, he would comply. With pleasure. "You want my cum down your throat? Then suck me. Now."

Her mouth drew closer and he thought he'd die from the anticipation or spurt right on her face if she didn't take him inside her soon. Her tongue darted out to slowly lick the beads of moisture from his flesh.

"Ah, hell." Exquisite feeling, but too damn slow. She was torturing him. His fingers tightened in her hair. When her mouth slid over the tip of his cock, then farther to engulf the entire head, he groaned. *Finally.*

"Mmm."

"Brianna..." He'd never felt anything so sexually powerful. "Suck," he encouraged, barely able to keep his voice from sounding like a command. Her submissive position, on her knees in front of him, made him feel dominant. In control. But at her mercy at the same time. The pure ecstasy of her mouth around his cock made his whole body tremble.

She sucked him strong and deep. Her hands slid around to his ass and her nails grazed his skin, making him tremble. His climax was in her hands. Well, in her mouth. Knowing she'd be swallowing his cum almost sent him over the edge.

"Ah, yeah, harder. I'm just about there." Past there, truthfully but he was determined to hold out. When she sucked and bobbed, he gritted his teeth, needing to come but not allowing himself to. He wanted to draw out the ecstasy as long as possible. Forever, if he could.

* * * * *

"Earth? Why is Earth so important?" Brianna asked, growing more confused by the moment. "I mean we already know that the Egesa want to control Earth's people and resources. They would have accomplished that long ago if we hadn't stopped them. But what does that have to do with actual survival? Marid can survive on its own resources indefinitely."

She suddenly squirmed uncomfortably. Visions flickered through her mind. Blurred. Familiar and definitely sexual. Damn. Her pussy throbbed. She needed to come badly.

"I speak of Daegal himself," Laszlo explained. "Not the Egesa. Please, let Colonel Briggs know he can come in now and I'll explain what's happening and what has been *in the works*, as the Earthlings say. Brianna?"

Her attention snapped back to Laszlo. "Oh. Yes. Sorry." She felt an embarrassing warmth on her face. Hoping nobody else noticed, she cleared her throat, then stood and walked to the door.

Obviously all of this was related to the reason Briggs had been plucked from his home planet and brought to Xylon. Much to her aggravation, he had refused to tell her any further details beyond what she already knew, saying that was Laszlo's decision for when the time was right. Though frustrating, she had to admire his loyalty to duty. She couldn't judge him the same as she had Kam, for Briggs didn't know what they'd been through, nor did he understand their doubts or the dynamic of the group here.

The doors whooshed open. When she looked out, Sam's head snapped up with a start. He looked flushed. "You can come in now, Sam."

Seeming a bit out of sorts, he nodded and pushed to his feet. He adjusted his uniform then joined her inside the room. While he stood there, he shifted back and forth until the others scooted over and she pulled up a chair beside hers. After she reseated herself, he sat down next to her and folded his hands on the table.

"Are you all right?" she whispered to him.

"Yeah. Sure. Fine," he answered, his voice a bit scratchy. He cleared his throat, not meeting her gaze.

Once he was settled, Laszlo continued the meeting. "Briggs is part of an experiment called Project ACE – alien command exchange. It's a cooperative project between Xylon and Earth. In this case, the United States military. Daegal needs Earth, or rather, the citizens of Earth. We don't have the numbers anymore to fight Daegal and the Egesa alone. In order to defeat them, we need the help of Earth's military forces and they need us. They stand no chance at present because, even if we arm them with advanced weaponry, they have no natural protection from the Egesa poisons and diseases. In the end, they wouldn't be able to survive."

Interesting, Brianna thought, her full attention focused on Laszlo's words. They'd had the numbers to fight the Egesa, until the bombing. Project ACE had been put together sometime before that. So did that mean Laszlo knew about the destruction to come, which would give Daegal a clear path to head toward Earth, en mass, as opposed to only a few scout ships?

Or maybe he'd set ACE up as a backup plan. She vaguely remembered him saying something in passing right before the bomb hit Xylon. Or was it after? She couldn't remember now. But somehow it was all connected.

And she wondered about another issue concerning ACE. Alien command *exchange*. That suggested a swap. Who had gone to Earth in exchange for Briggs? So many unknown details made her stomach churn and her suspicions rise all over again.

"Part of ACE was to see if Earth's people, full-blooded human males specifically, could withstand our Initiation Rite and if it would protect them as it does us. So, they could then fight effectively, with our help, to keep their planet free."

So that's why Briggs had been given a special Initiation formula. But the Initiation was an ancient, genetic rite. One couldn't synthesize it or change it in any way without consequences. Besides, it wasn't just a protection ceremony, it was a bonding rite and a breeding preparation. To generalize such a rite for military purposes, with an alien society, boded trouble, in her opinion.

"What about human females?" Alexa asked. "My mother was initiated. She was full-blooded."

"Females are a special situation due to their hormones. Some human females have no problems from what we've been able to ascertain by conducting simple tests, which is one way we used to select off-world mates years ago. But most have complications, which we still haven't figured out how to overcome. The males should be easier to work with because their system levels remain more stable and more consistent from subject to subject. I felt we didn't have a lot of time left for continued experimentation. We had to pick the larger and stronger gender base to study and perfect, even though we didn't really have a lot of detailed hormonal data accumulated on human males."

"What exactly does Daegal need with Earth?" Brianna asked. "You still haven't said." She noticed that Briggs leaned forward in interest. Was it possible he hadn't been given that particular detail either?

"Daegal is fighting the same weakness that I am, as the Top Commander should be too. We know of a fix. Unconventional. But it works. Short term only though, so the treatment has to be continuous. He needs Earth's bodies to harvest the substance, which can't be exactly replicated. At least, our trials have not been successful, so far."

"It sounds like you've been working together on this," Braden inserted.

"We have shared information."

Brianna stiffened. She exchanged a look with Braden.

Alexa gave a nervous laugh. "The way you're talking, you make it sound like Daegal needs our...Earthlings'...blood or something."

"No, not your blood. That could easily be manufactured by our labs. It's your spinal fluid."

"What?" she and Briggs asked at the same time, leaning forward in their seats, their eyes wide.

Well, that confirms it, Brianna thought. Briggs hadn't known. The shock on his face told the story. Spinal fluid. Damn.

"The naturally produced spinal fluid of full-blooded Earthlings contains special elements that will rejuvenate our health. We have definite confirmation of that from preliminary experiments."

Brianna refrained from asking how he'd acquired that particular data. She already knew that human females were brought to Xylon on a regular basis. She'd thought only for breeding purposes but perhaps not.

Alexa sometimes worked with the women after they arrived. Since she'd been taken from Earth too and had gone through a similar experience, she could relate easily to them. From her reaction to Laszlo's words, she obviously had no idea about any spinal fluid experiments.

Perhaps full-blooded humans brought to Xylon had gone to a private, secret area of the Lair. Or maybe even to some experimental facility outside the Lair. Briggs had been brought to the Lair without her knowledge.

"Both Leila and I have tried to recreate the substance, without success. The shots we're using are keeping me alive for now. But with each injection the effectiveness lessens."

Leila. Brianna's gaze switched to the woman. Erik's hand reached out and clutched hers. A definite protective gesture.

"There is something about the natural, pure fluid that makes it unique for the purpose we need. Something we can't duplicate. Daegal is already on his way to Earth to enslave its people, so he can extract the fluid he and the Top Commander need. His Healers have also been unsuccessful with their trials. They have given up and will go directly to the only available, unlimited source now."

"How do you know he's already on his way?" Briggs asked.

"His plans weren't exactly a secret."

"From you," Braden said.

"Yes."

Brianna felt Briggs stiffen next to her. She wanted to reach out to him but held back. On the other side of her, Torque also stiffened, then shifted in his seat.

"I would not agree to join with him in this," Laszlo further explained. "He knew I—we—would stop him if he tried to send a fully armed fleet toward Earth. After I refused to be a part of Earth's enslavement, I knew he would eventually try to immobilize us so he could use whatever humans he needed and in whatever way. But I never believed he would break the Pact of Salvation and completely annihilate Xylon in this way. His waning strength has made him desperate to take action before it's too late."

So now the truth of why Xylon was destroyed had been told. Brianna glanced at Alexa, wondering what her thoughts might be. No matter the reason for the annihilation, their home was still gone. And now, soon, Alexa's home planet might be changed forever if they were too late to stop Daegal and his forces.

"Multiple injections into the cortex area will be needed each day to fully restore our strength and longevity. Whether Daegal plans to kill those humans he uses by completely draining them or simply take a small amount from numerous subjects each day, I do not know. I suspect the former, simply because the latter would take too much time and effort and be an inefficient procedure. I think he will store the fluid and return with it to Marid. With the number of humans on Earth, he can afford to discard those used up bodies for many years to come. Once he sets up the extraction operation, he can leave corps of Agents to run the program from Earth to make sure the shipments stay on schedule."

"Son of a bitch!" Briggs interrupted. "I wasn't told any of this. Was our military even informed?"

"At the highest levels. The Egesa plan to enslave Earth is true, as I informed the officials I spoke with. However, any specifics beyond that were only related to the uppermost leaders to avoid additional panic."

"Like who?"

"Sorry. That's confidential...for now."

"That's bullshit!" Briggs shouted, coming halfway out of his seat.

Brianna nudged his leg and he glanced over at her briefly. She knew backing down went against his grain. But he did it anyway, relaxing his stance. Still, the tension rose to a high point in the room. She had to admit, like Briggs, she saw no reason for Laszlo to keep his Earth contacts a secret. Unless...maybe the U.S. wasn't one of those informed. Very possible.

Slowly, Briggs sat back down. "I'm frustrated as hell about all this. We can't just sit here and let it happen. So what's next? How do we stop Daegal from here? Can we?"

"We do have two orbiters with us down here," Laszlo answered calmly. "One short range and one long range."

"They won't do us any good," Braden said. "All of us can't fit into both of them. We can't open the launch area without flooding this chamber with the poisonous gases from up top, which would kill whoever was left behind."

"You and Torque need to figure out a way. I'm thinking we might be able to utilize the decontamination room for protection. Some sort of control would have to be rigged on the inside to open and close the lockdown mechanisms. Check into it. Consider it a priority. Erik and Halah, you need to make certain the orbiters are in working order, armed and properly supplied."

"Even if we do figure a way out of here," Pitch began, "we don't have the numbers needed to stop Daegal. You've said that yourself."

"We'll combine our forces with as many subbase forces as we can gather. We'll use the element of surprise to gain a foothold. Then if we can get Earth's men initiated, we might be able to regain control."

Brianna agreed they had to try. With help from Earth's military – if they could truly get the males protected – maybe they could stop an abomination from occurring.

"Brianna, Leila, Kam and I will get Briggs initiated and perfect the formula we'll need to use on Earth," Laszlo continued. "Pitch?"

"Yes."

"I want you beside Alexa and the babies at all times, protecting them, especially since Braden will need to be elsewhere a lot of the time. I will supply you with a working disruptor."

"You think there's a danger? Even down here?" Alexa asked with wide eyes. Her hand gripped Braden's.

"We don't want to take a chance on anyone, specifically the Egesa or one of Daegal's Agents, somehow locating this underground chamber and materializing in from an orbiter to check it out," Laszlo explained. "Even deep underground, our energy usage might register on someone's monitor, if their detector is powerful enough. We can't make any assumptions of safety. Even now."

"Can we dematerialize *up* to a Xylon orbiter?" she asked. "I've seen the rescue ships on the monitors."

"Not without being in contact with them to make sure the orbiter maintains its coordinates," Braden explained. "It would be almost certain suicide." His lips grazed her temple. "Don't worry. We're going to keep the babies safe. We'll keep all of us safe."

"Who are your assigned crew members for the orbiters going to be?" Brianna asked.

"I'll announce those specifics later. If we can't get these other primary assignments completed, there will be no reason to proceed."

"Can you at least give us a preliminary on the headings for the orbiters?" Erik asked. "It'll help us know how to supply and arm the ships."

"Yes of course. The long-range orbiter will head directly to Earth and set up military operations. While there, you'll need to get hand weapons and vid-com devices from our resident Warriors. As well as any other equipment you might need, like transport-connectors. The short-range orbiter will try to reach our outpost on the Ice Moon. While there, arrangements for fleet Warriors to head toward Earth and meet up with our coalition will be made, provided long-range orbiters are available. Rescue orbiters will be scheduled to return to Xylon to evacuate whoever is remaining in this chamber. Now, let's get to work."

Chapter Six

Underground

He set aside his pelt jacket. The air in the cave had grown heavy. Or maybe the heaviness came from his own thoughts and feelings. He studied the monitor in front of him, double-checking the settings to make sure of the accuracy displayed on the screen and that he was reading everything correctly. He needed to be certain before relaying any further details.

The system was old and contained a few glitches that he suspected were due to the Clan's lack of knowledge about the complete workings of the equipment more than any real problem with the electronics. The system had been cannibalized from a downed and abandoned orbiter years ago. They had repaired what they could and learned much in the process. He turned a knob, hoping to clear the static.

Yes. Better. There. He saw definite activity registering on the far side of the planet, beneath the surface. Amazing. He never would have believed it possible.

The door scraped open behind him.

He did not need to turn to know who it was. He had already alerted the others and had expected an appearance. They would want an update. "I have picked up increased activity in one of the auxiliary underground shelters," he said, knowing the question was coming.

"Where?"

"Where the thickest of the forests used to stand, at the base of what was once Red Mountain." The bastards had destroyed everything in their need for supremacy, even the land. Perhaps they had gotten what they deserved. Unfortunately, they were not the only victims in their senseless war. The Clans had stashed a bounty of food and water throughout the years, for emergencies and times of famine, but even that would not last forever. He feared greatly for the people and their survival if the planet could not regenerate its natural resources quickly. "In one of the oldest and deepest facilities."

"You believe there are survivors?"

"Undoubtedly. Manual systems are showing power." Those systems could not have engaged on their own. Whoever was down there had to have been ensconced in the shelter for a while, given the planet's present situation. He should have picked up their presence before now. But he had allowed himself to become too distracted. Even here on duty, his cock throbbed, needing —

"Do you want some of our fighters sent to investigate?"

The question pulled his attention back to the matter at hand. He needed to stay focused. For now. Later there would be time for pleasures of the flesh. He hesitated in

answering. Until forced to face the situation, he had avoided thinking of this possibility arising and what his reaction would be. "No. Leave them to their toils."

"What if they seek her?"

His jaw clenched. He rolled his shoulders and forced himself to remain calm. "It is unlikely. They cannot get to her, for they cannot survive on the surface as we can. They are trapped in their hole of advanced science. They will die there."

"They might have atmospheric suits and equipment."

"No others have attempted a search and recovery operation on foot and we have seen plenty of rescue orbiters. It is still too dangerous for them, even with protection."

"Perhaps you are right. But there will come a time soon when that will change and it will not be so dangerous anymore. Eventually, they *will* come."

He turned abruptly, anger building inside him, for he did not want to acknowledge the truth of those words. "If they do come, they will find nothing but the Clans. The rest of their people are gone. We will post extra sentries to keep watch. She remains with us!"

After a moment of silence, his companion replied, "Of course. I will see that it is done. Another problem might exist, however. Physically, she will survive. But she has yet to see herself. If our healing elements, added to her own, do not work, she might end up taking her own life. We have seen it before, even in those less...damaged. The others are concerned."

"No!" He shook his head, refusing to accept the tragic words. "She would not give up like that. She is strong. She will live," he whispered, turning back to the monitor. He barely heard the sigh behind him or the door scraping closed, which once again left him alone with his turbulent thoughts and emotions.

The others cared about her survival for selfish reasons only. He knew. Hell, he supposed he did too. But his reasons were completely the opposite of theirs.

He had not expected to feel anything but hatred for the woman—one of the planet's elite. Instead, he felt so much more. If she did recover, the others would demand her torture and enslavement. They blamed Xylon's upper echelon for many things. She would be used to bargain for their needs.

He was not so certain their anger served a real purpose anymore. The sins of those who had lived before them could not be changed. They had survived many generations without direct help from the Xylons. Counting on any help from the few who might have survived did not bode well in his mind.

Whatever happened, she would be in danger. Even given his high position in the groups, he did not know if he could protect her from the Clans' wrath and planned manipulations. Things would have been so much easier if he had not allowed her to touch his heart.

With a growl of frustration, he flipped off the monitor to conserve power. The fingers of his left hand curled into a fist. "She will live. I shall see to it. And I shall never allow anyone to harm her."

He turned and touched the cool rock wall, knowing she lay on a mat on the other side, awaiting his return. "That is my vow—the promise I give to you, Tar'a. On my life."

And if she wanted to leave him to find her own people again? He shook his head, his heart clenching. He did not know if he could ever be strong enough to let her go.

* * * * *

Planet Xylon
Auxiliary Underground Shelter

His mouth dry and his palms feeling a bit moist, Briggs stood in the middle of the conference room. Now that the meeting was over and everyone had gone, he finally had a quiet moment alone to think. There had been a lot of surprising and shocking information to absorb from the briefing. Some of which he hadn't entirely understood.

As soon as he had some time in a private location, he intended to document everything as best as he could remember for later review and transmission back to Earth. At first he'd thought this room would be perfect but people had been in and out and he knew some of the others would be returning soon. Besides—he glanced up into the corners—the room was monitored. He'd tried to enter one night after everyone had gone to sleep but the door had been locked. Just as well, he supposed, considering the surveillance system.

As he studied his surroundings, he suddenly realized just how white this particular room was. Not an important observation, but the excessive brightness reminded him of the decontamination room. Laszlo's suggestion of using that room as a safety area for those remaining behind, after the rest of them took off in the orbiters, seemed a good idea. If the controls could be worked out.

Good and bad memories flickered through his head as he remembered his time in that room, when he and Brianna had been detained there together. He'd wanted to fuck her something fierce. She'd punched him a good one instead. A smile tugged at his lips.

He noted the changes around him. The table and chairs in the room had been shoved up against one wall right after the meeting ended and before everyone dispersed. Colorful pillows and bedding from one or more of the private bedrooms, he assumed, had been moved in and scattered on the floor. A few thin mats had also been moved in. He frowned at the still uncomfortable-looking setup. Not a den of lust, for sure, but at least less sterile. *Sort of.*

Laszlo had said this would need to be the location for the Initiation, since the room contained full video and sound equipment. They would need a record of the

proceedings for future reference. He would have rather been in one of the personal quarters on a bed, in private with Brianna and whoever else needed to be in attendance. Someplace with a more romantic atmosphere.

If he got the chance, he'd speak with Laszlo about it. If the chemicals they intended to use on him affected a person's brain, as he'd been told, certainly atmosphere or anything else that also affected one's perception and emotions would be important. Anything to improve the outcome of the rite. They all needed this to succeed.

Besides, he didn't enjoy being treated like some fucking lab experiment. Though he knew that's essentially what he was. He wondered if he'd even be able to get his cock up and hard enough to go through with this. He wasn't some sex machine that could be switched on and off at will, regardless of his reputation back on Earth.

He let out a small chuckle.

Okay, maybe the sex part wasn't the problem. He could fuck some woman for the cause, even in front of others. But, somehow, that woman being Brianna bothered him. Not because he didn't want her, but because he did. Because she wasn't just some pussy to him. His attraction to her was more than physical.

He spotted a small table in one corner with an array of strange-looking equipment on it, along with a gray case and a few bottles of something. Laszlo had placed the objects there earlier.

The case brought back memories of their first attempt to initiate him in the Lair. His instability, his raging sexual need, until somehow his body had compensated and the feeling had waned.

A failure in their eyes. A success in his. Or so he had thought at the time.

He definitely needed to jack off. He'd been so sexually pent-up lately. But when he remembered them wanting to perform anal sex on him with some sort of dildo they'd kept in a case similar to the one on the table now, it dampened his desire. He'd refused to allow them to fuck him in the ass. He would do so again if they made another attempt. He intended to retain some control over what happened to his body.

As far as he understood, from what Laszlo had told him in private, they needed to extract his semen after the special chemicals were introduced into his body via an injection. Then they'd attempt to make some sort of serum, or whatever he'd called it, that they'd use to inject Earth's military men. Faster than putting each and every one of them through the rite itself. It sounded like a reasonable plan. His ass shouldn't be a factor.

* * * * *

Brianna headed toward the far end of the shelter to meet with Braden. He, Alexa and the babies had been given one of the private rooms down here. Perfect for a secure meeting, since the private quarters weren't monitored. Though her entry would be recorded by the corridor surveillance system for anyone curious enough to check the

vid archives. She couldn't see any corridor monitors but she knew they were there. Not that a visit to her brother should arouse suspicion.

Once again sexual feelings tugged at her. Not as powerful as before but still distracting. What was going on with her body? She stopped and leaned against the corridor wall. Nobody was around that she could see or hear. One hand drifted between her legs and her fingers massaged her cunt. The fingers of her other hand pinched and pulled at one of her nipples through the uniform. "Mmm." She rubbed her back against the wall as her fingers pressed even deeper into her pussy. She needed relief, if only a bit.

Her light touches weren't nearly enough though. She needed skin against skin. Hell, she needed a nice, wet tongue and a big, hard cock fucking her. Both at the same time, preferably.

She remembered the monitors. Damn. After adjusting her uniform, she pushed away from the wall and continued down the corridor. Relief would have to wait for later.

After the meeting in the conference room, she overheard Alexa planning to take the triplets to medical for Leila to look over. Leila had said she would meet her there as soon as she could get away from Laszlo. The checkups were a daily routine and quite necessary to watch for any abnormalities in the babies that might arise from Alexa's Earth physiology. After what they'd been told about Super-breeder side effects, she was certain that Alexa and Braden both felt additional concerns.

With her and the babies gone, now was the perfect opportunity to have a bit of alone time with her twin. If he'd stayed behind. Stopping in front of Braden's door, she buzzed for entry.

"Come."

Relief spread through her when she heard his voice. Having Braden near always kept her grounded. If anything ever happened to him, as it had to Tara, she didn't think she could stand it.

The door slid open almost soundlessly. As soon as she stepped inside the room and the door closed behind her, they hugged in greeting. Brianna pulled back first, knowing they might not have much alone time. "Quite a mess we're in the middle of here."

"To say the least."

"I tried to catch you after the meeting but I didn't want to pull you away from Alexa. I'd hoped to check in with you before the Initiation starts. I'm glad you're here."

"I suspected you would come, so I told Alexa that I needed to stay behind. Pitch and Josella are with her. She understands the seriousness of our situation and knows I have responsibilities and need to put plans into motion."

"Alexa wasn't curious for details?" She wondered just how much he'd actually confided in her. She knew he hated keeping secrets from his mate.

"Alexa knows when to ask questions and when not to. She's beyond what I deserve, Brianna, and I love her more every day. Now I've got three little ones to love too." A smile tugged at his lips and he shook his head slightly, as if not believing his good fortune.

Brianna's heart melted. The look on Braden's face always softened when he spoke of Alexa. She saw such a depth of caring in his eyes for his children that a small tear formed in her own eye. She couldn't be happier about her twin finding his true love. She hoped to be as lucky someday with a love and family of her own.

"What do you think about everything Laszlo said?"

"Well, I'm not going through each of his explanations and theories, point by point. It would take too damn long. So let me just say that at first I wasn't buying any of it. Now, after thinking over everything and how it all connects, a lot of what he said does make sense, given what's happened."

"But still, I feel like we're not getting the full story from him."

"No. We probably never will. He'll make certain he keeps enough knowledge to himself to save his own ass and position."

"Do you think that's his real intention?" She would rather believe otherwise. Laszlo was always one whom the Warriors and even Xylon's non-Warriors looked up to. "Are we being too hard on him?"

"I don't know his real intention, Brianna. But after what he's put us through, I'm not feeling overly generous. Everything he did was supposedly for our protection. All right. Maybe. But at what cost? Certainly there had to have been a better way."

Conflict still tugged at her deep inside. "He's been our leader for a long time. He has to be given some consideration for that."

"I'm not suggesting we overthrow him. But we can't afford to trust Laszlo completely without verification of what he says. He may still have an alternate plan in motion that he hasn't revealed to us."

"Agreed."

"Initially, we need to get out of here, regroup our people as best we can, deal with Daegal and the situation facing Earth. I have to believe that what Laszlo said about the spinal fluid is true, otherwise Briggs wouldn't be here."

"And I personally saw the Initiation file on him."

"Right. Which further strengthens my belief about the testing of Earth's men being legitimate and in place. Are the deep-space trackers working down here?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Find out. If so, see if you can verify that Daegal's already on his way to Earth. If he's out there, as Laszlo said, Daegal's fleet will probably be traveling under his own signature, so he shouldn't be hard to locate. He won't expect any Xylons to be a threat or even looking for him. Don't let anyone know what you're doing but see what you can discover. We need a timeline on Daegal's arrival on Earth."

"All right. I'll have to check back in with Laszlo first about the Initiation before I'm missed or he'll get suspicious. I'm the lead. But I'll get you the information before we start. I should have time."

"Good."

"What if we can't verify that Daegal is on his way to Earth? You can't be thinking about not taking the long-range orbiter to Earth if the deep-space trackers don't pick him up, can you?"

"It's an old ship. We might be better off waiting if we can't confirm."

Waiting could result in dire consequence for the people of Earth. Consequences she didn't think she could live with. "What if we confirm later. What if we're too late? Do we take that chance and possibly sacrifice Earth when we could stop the invasion?" Brianna rubbed her temple, feeling a headache coming on.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a pending headache."

"I've had one of those all day myself. It's making me irritable."

She knew how he felt. "What if we miss picking up Daegal with the tracker because he's cloaked for some reason or out of range?"

Braden crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall. "Like I said, I don't know yet, Brianna. Don't bombard me with 'what ifs'." A look of exhaustion crossed his face. "I need more information."

"And if we can't get it?" A quick decision wasn't always the best way to go and she knew she was pushing. But in this case, no matter how much information they had, Braden still might be forced into making a gut choice in the end.

"Let's just take one step at a time. All right? I realize that we might have to follow through regardless of what we find. Some things have a momentum of their own. Report back to Laszlo. We don't want him to get suspicious. I'll be working with Torque to try to figure out if the decontamination room can be rigged for our use. Send an internal, coded message to the control room when you know something. Use the un-coded code, just so no one else picks up on what we're doing. Do you remember it?"

"Yes." When they were younger, they'd all had various means of communicating with each other. Various types of code that all four of them used and special code just between the twins or just between the two sisters or brothers. Some code looked like random letters. Other code looked and sounded like casual conversation but contained secret messages—that was what they referred to as their un-coded code. It came in handy when other ears might be listening.

"Who's going to be working with us behind the scenes, Braden? Not Delemar, Josella or Alexa, I'm assuming." They were the non-Warriors down here.

"Definitely not Delemar or Josella. Alexa, well, I'm not going to lie to her. But I'll try to keep her on a need-to-know basis. She's under a lot of stress right now and is worried about the babies. I'd rather not tell her too much because I don't want her

saying anything to Kam by accident. Her instinct will be to protect him and I just don't know how much to trust him or Halah right now."

"Do you really believe Kam would betray us, Braden? You two are, or were, like brothers." He, Erik and Kam had been inseparable at one time. She didn't like the thought of all these suspicions separating them into two camps. "I really thought he'd proven himself to us...until the meeting."

"So had I. I want to believe in him, Brianna. But he kept secrets from us. For Laszlo."

"And he has that implant," she offered, still not wanting to believe he would betray them. But she had to keep all the facts in mind.

"Yeah. That worries me too, on more levels than one. I have to be sure. About everyone. I'm not even sure how much to trust Leila now."

She nodded. Leila and Laszlo were both Healers. They could very well have a separate agenda from the rest of the group. Xylon Healers had a bad reputation for running secret agendas. Leila hadn't told them about the shots she'd been giving Laszlo. But then, neither had Erik. Could it be possible he hadn't known about her involvement?

"We'll bring in Erik soon but I don't want to put him in a position of keeping secrets from Leila until we have to. She's close to Kam and if Erik accidentally mentions anything, she might think she's doing something to help by telling Kam more than we actually want him to know. I hope soon we'll be able to definitively prove that Kam is the Xylon Warrior and friend we've all known over the years and that we *can* trust him. I don't like what's been happening. This uncertainty is eating away at all of us."

"I agree. Do you want me to get Torque in here? He should be in on this from the start. He's extremely sharp in tight situations. We need him. We need to be united."

"Not yet. He's too explosive, especially since we lost Tara. Once we have a few more facts, we'll bring in him and Erik. I don't want a lot of arguing back and forth about what's happened. I want a plan in place or at least a solid idea of what we want to do."

Torque definitely wasn't himself right now and might not be thinking clearly. But no one was one hundred percent. She didn't like excluding him, not even at this stage. Collectively, they'd be much stronger.

Still, she'd do as Braden wished. And Erik? Something continued to bother her about the whole situation with him but she couldn't figure out exactly what it was. She hated to bring up the issue but it had to have crossed her brother's mind. "Do you really think we can trust Erik to side with us? I mean, what if Leila —"

"We can trust Erik. I'd trust him with my life, my family's life, no matter what. No matter Leila's position. He and I have been through too much together over the years."

"I know but —"

"I trust him, Brianna. Period. I don't want to hear any more questions about it." He uncrossed his arms and pushed away from the wall.

Recognizing the fierce look on Braden's face, she didn't argue, hoping he wasn't misplacing his trust. To expect Erik to go against his mate if a choice had to be made was not something she'd bet her life on.

"Before we make any definite decisions, we'll also need more details about ACE," Braden said, his brow furrowing.

"Are you thinking the project might be about more than it appears? Part of a larger, hidden agenda, maybe?"

"That's what we need to find out. If we head for Earth, I want to make certain we're a part of the solution, not a further cause of problems for those people. Can you try to get some additional information out of Briggs?"

"I already have. He's being closemouthed about what he knows. Though from his reaction in the meeting, I suspect that he doesn't know much more than what Laszlo related and not even some of that until Laszlo told us all in the conference room. He was as shocked as the rest of us about the spinal fluid. I think he truly believed this was solely about the Egesa invasion and their enslaving Earth's people to gain control over another planet's resources."

"Well, make certain, if you can. Maybe he'll be more pliant after he fucks you." Braden grinned.

She smacked his shoulder. "Don't make me take you down."

"Like you could."

"Don't underestimate me, brother."

"Never." He chuckled.

"I'll continue to try to find out what Briggs knows and what his stand is if it comes to a fight. Knowing who to trust and who we can count on will be key." She paused as Braden's smile faded and a concerned look crossed his face. "What is it?"

"Something happens in your eyes when you speak about him. I get the feeling something personal is brewing between you two."

She shrugged, avoiding direct eye contact. She didn't like that her emotions showed in her eyes, even if only to Braden, for she didn't know herself what was brewing. Not for sure. "I think his heart is in the right place. That's all."

"Be careful, Brianna."

She glanced up at him. "Always. Don't worry."

After a last hug, she left Braden's quarters. The door slid closed and she leaned back against the corridor wall and let out a heavy breath. Braden's question about her and Briggs made her realize just how much she'd allowed Sam to get to her emotionally. She wasn't so certain that was a good thing, for any of them. Whatever feelings she might have could skew her decisions if she didn't take care.

With renewed determination to get them all out of this auxiliary shelter safely, she pushed away from the wall and quickly made her way back toward the meeting room.

Her mind raced with too many thoughts. They needed more information. And they needed it fast.

As she turned the corner, she met Laszlo in the corridor outside the conference room door. "Do you need me to do anything before the Initiation starts?"

"Yes. Go to my private quarters and rest. You look exhausted and you're going to need your strength. You won't be disturbed in my room. Take some time there to relax. Leila and I still have a few tests to run. We'll let you know when we're ready."

His quarters. Yes. Laszlo had computing equipment in his quarters. She could do the research for Braden while she was there instead of using the system located on the lower level, which would have been the only other one available to her. Braden and Torque would be occupying the systems in the control room. Using the med computer would look too suspicious.

Laszlo had just handed her the perfect opportunity. She nodded. "I'll be waiting to hear from you."

* * * * *

Erik squatted in the transport hole, studying the storage readouts. He'd already supplied the larger orbiter with essentials, even though they couldn't spare much food, water and medical supplies. They had a second orbiter to also supply, in case the Ice Moon was on restricted rations, and they'd need to leave supplies here in the shelter as well.

Luckily they'd be able to restock some of the necessities while on Earth. Now he was checking the weapons capacity and storage. He felt uncomfortable preparing for such a mission without a good supply of hand and flight weapons but he had few choices.

He flipped a pit switch and a moment later a localized alarm went off. "What the hell?" He rose and stepped onto the catwalk. His boots clanged loudly on the grating. He peered at a side monitor.

Halah leaned over the edge, hanging on to a rung from the side ladder. "Get out of there, Rhodes! We've got an overload somewhere."

"I hear it. I'm not deaf. It's a double failure in the main fuel line and weapons systems." He tapped the readouts on the screen. "I'll fix it from down here. Coordinate from the main panel."

"You're going to get yourself fried! That's a critical alarm. The early warning system didn't go off."

Figures. Another system down. "Just do as I say." He disappeared back into the hole and pulled off the weapons panel. They couldn't afford to lose this ship. He flipped on

the nearby speaker. "Let's disengage the volatile systems until we can isolate and resolve the problem. Cut the power to W-5 through W-15."

"Power cut," Halah's voice responded.

Damn. No change. He had to get the heat levels down fast, before everything blew.

"It's still on overload. Too much heat buildup."

"Yeah, I can see that." The gauges on the side panel showed everything had pushed beyond maximum.

"If you get roasted, Braden will fry my ass too. Now get out of there so I can seal the chamber!"

"Can we stay calm here?" He punched on the cooling system, opening it up to full capacity, but the numbers continued to rise. "Give me more coolant from the auxiliary."

"I'm giving you the facts, Rhodes. I have to seal the chamber."

"Halah! Coolant. If you seal me up in here before I order it, I'll haunt you to your grave, Warrior." He counted on her listening to a command rank order.

"I'm not going to seal you in." Her voice changed from determined to resigned. "You're on standard max. That's it. There's no direct access to the auxiliary. I can't increase the output on this particular system without a direct-line connector tube and there's no time to set one up."

"Perfect," Erik grumbled. "I'm going to do an eighty percent fuel dump on the main tank." If he didn't lower the levels and the panels popped, the orbiter as well as the whole auxiliary shelter could go up in a wall of flames. At twenty percent capacity, if a fire broke out, they'd be able to douse it before the tank exploded.

"We need that fuel. The orbiter can't make it to Earth without its full supply."

"If this orbiter blows, the fuel won't matter. There will still be enough in there along with the secondary tank to get to our outpost on the Ice Moon. We can refuel there." Damn ancient flyer. Too bad the smaller orbiter was short range only. It was more modern and would have been safer to take to Earth, if it had the capacity for that distance.

The short-range orbiters didn't have the protective covering needed for extended space travel. The outer shield would disintegrate. For short-range flights, the covering required was much thinner. Thus the short-range orbiters were cheaper to manufacture and were much more plentiful.

The newer orbiters also had regenerative, non-liquid energy. It wasn't unlimited but went a long way before needing a core replacement and wasn't prone to this type of overheating.

"There will be barely enough fuel if you dump, Erik."

"So do you have an idea or are you just arguing with me again? You can't have it both ways—either we seal the chamber and it blows or we try to save this thing."

"Let me set up a catch."

"It'll filter too slowly."

"Not a spare tank, a storage unit."

"Well, do it fast." He heard a whirring sound even before he'd finished his sentence. She must be opening up one of the compartments where the storage units were kept. They weren't constructed to hold fuel but it would do if she hurried and transferred the spill to a connecting fuel tank. They'd lose some in the transfer but not an excessive amount.

He watched the gauges continue to rise past the safety levels. Every moment that passed felt like a lifetime. A pop and a spark set his heart to pounding. That's it. No more time to wait. He wasn't going up in flames. "I'm dumping."

"Wait! It's not positioned."

"We're at critical. I'm not getting blown up down here because your ass is too slow." He jumped back as another spark flew. *Shit.*

"Fuck you, Rhodes! These systems only move at one speed. All right, I've got it positioned. Dump it."

He hit the button and the fuel streamed out of the tank, sloshing down into the storage bin. He checked the panel and saw the pressure dropping. "Are you transferring to another tank?"

"Yes. It'll take a while though. We'll lose some in the transfer but it should be minimal."

"Yeah, I know that," he mumbled. After the onboard tank lowered to below safety levels for long-range flight, he turned off the drain and sagged in relief. Before they continued, he'd need to replace the fuel lines and do a complete system overhaul and then reload the fuel, but at least one disaster had been avoided. If he rewired the old weapons and engineering panel connections, that should take care of the problem. He would put in an overload auto bypass to a backup secondary system for safety. He climbed out of the hole and up top.

Halah stared at him, her hands on her hips. "You took a stupid chance by not letting me seal the chamber. You could have blown out this entire side of the shelter and potentially killed us all by letting in the toxic surface gas."

"Well, that didn't happen, so get off my ass. In my estimation, you're the one who lost it up here."

"I went by the book. Those levels were past critical."

He wiped his hands on a cloth that hung from a grated rack. Halah going by the book. That had to be a first. Of course, she'd been right to do so. But they really needed that orbiter. He hadn't wanted to take a chance of losing what might be their only chance to get to Earth quickly. He'd have gotten out in time for them to seal up the chamber before the ship blew. He was familiar with these old systems and their capabilities. He'd still had a few seconds left, if the pressure had continued to rise, before he would have had to get out of the hole.

"You want to tell me what you did down here to fry things? Systems don't just overload on their own."

What? For a long, hard minute, he stared at her, not believing his ears. "I didn't do a damn thing. That ship's been docked for who knows how many years. When the main control panel was engaged, the electro-connectors overheated." Her accusation got him thinking though. He damn well hoped nobody else down here had sabotaged the orbiter before he had gotten to it. He'd need to alert Braden to what had happened.

She looked at him skeptically, then with a huff, she turned on her heel and left the area, heading toward the smaller orbiter's transport holding area. He could feel the frustration radiating off her.

"What a bitch," he whispered. He and Halah never had gotten along, even though she was now mated to one of his best friends. Well, he used to consider Kam one of his best friends. Lately, he wasn't so certain.

They'd had a lot of tough times, especially where trust was concerned. Just when he thought the old Kam was back, something else would happen to make him doubt his friend again.

Would Kam ever go against his own father, now that he knew his relation to Laszlo? Erik had his doubts, given Kam's recent behavior. He wondered just how long Kam had known about his and Laszlo's genetic connection.

Now, in addition to all that shit, he had to work with Kam's new mate. In close quarters too. Halah Shirota was a skilled Class 1 Warrior but they rubbed each other the wrong way. Always had. Always would.

Chapter Seven

Kam rubbed his throat as he stared down in awe at the babies. They looked so tiny. So innocent. The new Triad of Power.

He could only marvel at what they'd accomplish during their lifetimes. If what Laszlo said turned out to be true, they'd each have a very long life to look forward to. They would no doubt see and experience more wonders and advances than he could ever imagine.

Only if they got off Xylon though. The planet was dead and they would be too if they couldn't escape this underground shelter.

He frowned as the enormity of their situation struck him. So much was at stake. For everyone's future—those down here in the shelter, the Xylon Warriors who'd survived elsewhere, as well as the innocent citizens on all the reachable free planets that Xylon helped to protect.

The burden seemed overwhelming.

As he thought about everything Laszlo had told them, a pang of sadness hit him deep in his gut, especially for his sister. With Braden having the same longevity as the triplets but not Alexa, they would certainly face some rough times. The stress within the family would be palpable, probably already was. He couldn't imagine how they would survive it. If he had to think about losing Halah, not growing old along with her... He shook his head.

He'd spoken briefly with Alexa and Pitch when he'd entered medical. Pitch had needed to recharge his disruptor. To make certain they all were safe, Kam had agreed to stay close by until his return. He doubted anyone could find them down here but no reason to take any chances. If Laszlo felt the extra guard was needed, he might just be right. He seemed uncannily able to predict future events at times.

After some prodding from him to relax, Alexa had also left, but just to pace in the corridor. Not quite what he'd meant but maybe some time alone would do her good. A lot was weighing on her mind and she definitely wasn't herself. He understood her not wanting to be far from the babies but she needed a break from meetings, responsibilities and thoughts of pending tragedies.

Josella had stayed with the babies when Alexa took to the corridor with her thoughts but then left soon afterward to give him some private time with the triplets. Kam took comfort in that at least Josella and Alexa trusted him. In fact, neither of them had ever expressed any doubts about his motives, as far as he knew. He wished the others—Braden, Erik and Torque—would trust him the same. Especially Braden and Erik, whom he considered his closest friends. He loved his people, his family and was only trying to do what was best for all of them. Unfortunately, he'd gotten caught up in

Laszlo's secrets and couldn't seem to find his way completely out without causing everyone more problems.

Damn. His head and throat burned like a firestorm! Leila would have something to give him. She always seemed able to provide him some relief from his pain, even if it was just temporary.

Halah could normally take care of his head but this pain felt different from his normal headaches. Stress perhaps. At least he hoped that's all it was.

Applying her electrical powers to the device in his throat could be too dangerous, so she hadn't attempted to stop that pain. She feared, even deactivated, the device still might explode. They'd decided Leila was their best and safest defense against his problems.

He hoped she could also stop the vibration he'd recently begun to feel in his throat. Or thought he felt. Maybe it was just an irritation of the surrounding tissue because it also burned. He wished they could just remove the damn device but Leila said there was no way without endangering his life. The extended tendrils of power were too entangled with his nervous system and the veins in his throat. Frost had done a good job with the implant. The vicious bitch.

He'd made a stop at medical for a pain killer and also to see the little ones. He knew Leila was going to stop in to check them over, then join Laszlo and the rest of them later, for the ceremony with Briggs.

Since Laszlo had set up a private lab in an empty viewing room near the conference area for the testing and research of the Initiation drugs as well as the shots he was receiving from Leila, the small medical facility here would be free for Leila and the others to use. Plus the private lab gave Laszlo, well, privacy.

Kam imagined it would be difficult to concentrate on work and especially research with people milling about or hovering over one's shoulder. The lab butted up against the conference room which contained an old-fashioned two-way mirror that had been installed many years ago prior to the vid-monitors, from what Laszlo had told him.

He'd actually been in the lab and the mirror afforded a better, wide-angle view than the monitors. If more than a couple of people were viewing the activity in the room, the larger "screen" would be more comfortable than having everyone huddled around a small computer. The advantage of the vid-monitors was the ability to view the room from different angles and to zoom in on something if necessary. So both served a purpose, making the conference room the perfect location for the Initiation.

Pushing aside all their current problems—not wanting to think about any of them for a time—Kam once more gazed down at the babies. A smile crossed his face. He couldn't look at them and not smile.

The two girls slept soundly in the same makeshift medical crib. It looked as if they were holding hands. More likely that was just an accident due to their placement. Still, it was such a touching sight.

The boy lay quietly in his own shallow glassy crib next to them, awake and seemingly content. For an infant, he seemed extra alert and had been that way right from birth. A real Xylon Warrior in the making.

The babies hadn't yet been given names. Alexa said names were special and she wanted to take her time and let their personalities come forth first. Braden had agreed that simply selecting any name just to get it done and over with, especially during this tragic time, was not a good idea. So, for now, everyone was waiting to see what Braden and Alexa would ultimately decide.

Kam moved closer to the girls and bent over them for a closer look. So sweet and beautiful. They already had a bit of soft black fuzz on their heads. Their little pink lips each held an adorable pout. He imagined they'd be breaking a lot of men's hearts in the future. He wondered how Braden would deal with their growing up. He had a feeling Braden would be more protective than most Xylon fathers. And he knew Alexa would make a wonderful mother.

Xylon and Earth had evolved much the same, especially in their feelings toward family. They actually were more alike than they were different, in his opinion. Maybe that's why he'd always found Earth so fascinating.

He reached out toward one of the girls, unable to resist. But as soon as he moved, he winced. His head hurt so much now he thought he might go crazy if Leila didn't return soon. What was happening to him?

His hand froze before he touched the little girl. "What the hell?" he whispered. He couldn't move. His hand shook as he tried to push it forward. His eyes narrowed and he sensed something strong and powerful nearby. Even stronger than the energy he felt when around Laszlo.

Who? Nobody down here had such a force about them.

Suddenly, the realization struck him. His eyes widened and his gaze snapped over to the other crib, where the boy lay staring directly at him with penetrating blue eyes. Was it possible?

"Kam?"

His hand suddenly released. After a stunned moment, he straightened up and turned toward the door. "Um, yeah. Pitch. That was fast."

"I didn't want to be gone long. I have a hand charger with me now, in case I require it, so I won't need to unnecessarily leave Alexa and the babies again."

"Good."

Pitch's eyes narrowed. "What are you doing?"

So now Pitch was suspicious of him too. Or was he reading too much into the look? He couldn't fault the man completely since his job was to protect the babies. But it still rubbed him the wrong way, especially after all he, Pitch and Halah had been through together. "Just admiring the triplets."

Oddly, the pain in his head had now eased, returning to the normal pain he was familiar with, almost as if some switch had been turned off. "Josella gave me some alone time with them. You saw Alexa pacing the corridor, I'm sure. I think Laszlo shook her up today."

"I saw her. Laszlo shook us all up today."

"Yes. You're right about that," Kam half mumbled as he glanced back down at the boy. Even without checking his wrist sensor, he felt the child's protective nature toward his sisters, as if the boy already knew they were his family. But still Kam questioned what had happened.

Even if true, and the boy had somehow halted his hand, what danger did he pose? They were his blood. He'd never harm them. The boy should feel that. He had obviously allowed Braden, Josella, Leila, Pitch and of course Alexa, to touch the girls. Perhaps he was simply testing...

Kam shook his head. What was he thinking? Alexa nor Braden had mentioned anything odd about the child. They would have noticed first. Or Leila. He was losing his mind or had suffered some sort of weakness or illusion from the pain.

When his hand had released, the pain had also, so that had to be it. Just the pain. He rubbed his temple, then his throat as Laszlo's words echoed in his head, *they will attain great powers*.

If not an illusion due to the pain...

"Stay close to them, Pitch," he said, still looking at the triplets, still assessing what he couldn't believe to be true. "They're quite special. Maybe even more so than we've been told." He debated whether or not to tell Laszlo about what had happened. Perhaps it was time he kept some secrets of his own from their leader. Until he knew for certain what was going on anyway.

"That's my job. I'll see they stay safe. Leila's in the corridor talking with Alexa. You needed to see her?"

"Oh good. Yes. Now that you're back, I'll go and talk to her."

"Very well."

Kam ignored the odd look on Pitch's face as he passed. As if Pitch knew something had happened but couldn't figure out what. He was a good Warrior and hadn't risen to head of security under Tara for no reason.

* * * * *

Underground

His thick, hard cock slid into her pussy as she lay on her back. So big. And beyond incredible. Tara bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out in sexual ecstasy. Knowledge of how much he affected her would give him even more power over her than he already had. And she wasn't used to giving up power, not even in sexual situations.

Her vision remained blurred, so she couldn't really see him, or anything else, just movement and shadows. She prayed this wasn't a permanent condition. She needed to get out of here. To find her family.

Two male hands held her arms on the ground above her head, restraining her, but not forcibly. Also, not the same man who was fucking her. There were two men. Again, like before. The same two. And they knew how to fuck a woman well.

With her eyes not working properly, her other senses had kicked into high. She felt everything much more intently, which made her orgasms phenomenal. She recognized the men's scents now, which was how she knew they were the same ones who always came to her. One slightly smoky, the one who held her. The one fucking her smelled spicy and always took the lead. Always took care of her, even beyond the sex.

She knew he was capable of a very tender touch. He'd bathed and fed her, dressed her, changed her bandages when needed. He'd held her gently when she'd felt all hope was lost, her emotions getting the better of her. She owed him a lot. Her life, in fact.

Every time he even brushed her flesh, she felt it right to the core of her being. She ached to explore his body with her fingertips, to feel if he was as strong and fit as she imagined, but her hands remained wrapped as they'd been since she had been brought here, giving her a feeling of helplessness which she disliked tremendously.

Right now she felt every ridge of his cock inside her. Filling her completely. Her muscles gripped his shaft as if their bodies had been made to fit together. He thrust shallowly, then deep. So deeply. So slowly. As if he had all the time in the world. He enjoyed making her come and rarely gave her time to rest between orgasms. Not that she minded. His endurance amazed her.

She'd learned that, when they stimulated her and especially when they fucked her hard, she felt no pain in her body, which sometimes got so bad that she thought she'd scream from the agony. But while they touched her, she felt only pleasure. Intense and powerful. So she welcomed their taking of her body as often as they wanted to come to her.

They often spoke to each other in their language, which she thought she recognized but didn't understand other than a word or two. She had tried speaking with the men on numerous occasions but her words more often than not came out jumbled. Her internal translator obviously wasn't working properly. It must have been damaged when she got hurt in the explosion.

Her brain felt fried and her memory kept going in and out on her. She often got so confused she thought she might be going crazy.

At least she knew who she was. She just didn't know where she was. Since her body still hadn't self-healed, she must be bad off. But then, after what had happened, she felt lucky to be alive at all.

She had no idea how long she'd been here with these men, how many others were with them or how long it had been since the bomb hit Xylon. All sense of time had vanished for her.

As the man thrust into her pussy, she arched her back and moaned, unable to remain silent. So good. As she began to feel stronger with each thrust of his cock, understanding suddenly struck her.

Yes. She knew what they were doing. She could feel it. This was about more than just sex. They were transferring healing elements from their bodies to hers. Definitely Xylon Warriors of some sort then.

She'd never known the transfer of healing elements to be possible though beyond the Initiation ceremony. Confusion again settled in.

Certainly, if they were Xylons, she would understand them even without her translator. Her stomach suddenly clenched. What if they weren't Xylons at all? But were... No. It couldn't be.

"Oh...ah..." The sexual explosion they always gave her was only moments away. The first of many, she hoped.

The man had her legs hooked over his arms as he thrust repeatedly into her cunt while on his knees. He grunted with each powerful lunge. "*Duni, Tar'a. Duni.*"

She didn't know what his words meant but her name spoken in his deep voice sent her into a state of pure pleasure and racing toward orgasm.

The other man's hands slid along her arms and down to her breasts. He tweaked her nipples and she squirmed. A deep chuckle reached her ears. He apparently had figured out that she enjoyed having that done to her.

He tweaked her nipples harder. "*Duni, yunep!*"

"Ah!" The pleasure zipped through her body like an electrical current, hitting every nerve as the orgasm erupted inside her and spread.

The man fucking her groaned. He continued to fuck her, even after her orgasm began to wane. The other man twisted her nipples, not letting her relax.

"Oh!" Her body came back to life immediately. Her clit throbbed anew. She felt something hard and moist being slowly pushed into her ass. She didn't know what it was, but the ecstasy was incredible, especially with a cock still in her pussy.

Yes. *Fuck me.* Something warm rubbed against her clit. She came hard. Each time she felt the incredible sensation, she came until she was sobbing. She'd never felt anything so powerful in her life. The man fucking her finally came in her pussy. They both shook and moaned from the intensity. That's all she remembered before her eyes drifted closed and she passed out.

He collapsed beside her, totally spent. Completely satisfied. After recovering his breath, he removed the Clans' specialized sex tools from her clit and ass, then rose to lick one of her nipples. How she made him come so hard every time he fucked her amazed him. She was an incredible woman.

In one sense her effect on his emotions and physical being angered him. He was supposed to hate her. But he never had. Not even the first time when he had found her

dying in the rubble and discovered who she was. Something about her called to him, to a soft side deep within him that he had not even realized existed.

As she healed, something inside him was healing too. The anger he had held in his gut all these years ebbed more and more each day. He never had felt as venomous as the rest of the Clans but a certain resentment still existed, a feeling practically inbred in him against those who ruled the planet. As such, he had tried to keep some distance between himself and the woman by limiting communication. It had not worked. She still got to his heart.

Or maybe the incredible sex had simply fogged his thinking. Even injured, she knew how to make a man feel complete. At full health, she would be a sexual phenomenon.

The trust she had shown by allowing them to help her humbled him. He sucked her nipple into his mouth, delighting in the taste, not able to get enough of her. He ached to lick her entire body. And would do so. Soon. But he wanted privacy for that.

"She sleeps," his companion said. "Do I fuck her anyway?" With a look of sexual intensity on his face, he stroked his hard cock.

Letting her nipple slip from between his lips, he looked up at his clansman. "She does not need your seed at this time. Can you wait?" He needed to be alone with her. To savor her. Besides, her brain still was not fully functional and he felt extra protective about exposing her to too much.

"I cannot wait but I will take care of my needs myself and let her rest."

"Good. She will heal," he said looking back down at her, knowing she just needed time now. "That is fairly certain. Though she will still need us both for a while."

"And afterward? Which one of us gets her if the Clans allow it?"

His gaze snapped up sharply. The thought that another might want her for his own had never crossed his mind. She belonged to *him*. But now was not the time to dispute ownership of the woman, for as he had said, she would still need both of them for a time.

He would also need to convince the others not to torture and torment her in revenge for policies and experiments she had played no part in. They had a long road ahead of them. Any and all allies would be needed and appreciated.

"We will handle things as they come. Go. Relieve yourself."

The other hesitated, still looking hungrily down at her.

"Now. I tire of looking at your cock jutting in my face."

With a grunt, the man turned and left them alone. "I will return later," he called back over his shoulder. "Next time, I will fuck her first."

"Do not count on it, my friend," he whispered, stroking the soft skin of her stomach. "This woman is mine."

* * * * *

Nav-Control Ship FSMF-36, Deep Space

Frost stared at the technician in disbelief. "Are you certain?"

"There's no doubt. Both readings are the same."

"Keep this to yourself for now. I will issue orders soon."

He nodded and returned to his station. Frost sat down in her command chair and fingered the control device around her neck, now fitted with the new plug-in tracker. She could hardly believe the report she'd just been given. She knew where Kam was.

An almost unbelievable coincidence.

No, actually... It most likely was not a coincidence but a carefully calculated plan by Daegal. She needed to find out from her contact.

He'd given her the other tracking information—the one that identified the spy who was supplying information to Daegal. He believed the informant would turn and serve them for a higher price. He'd left the negotiations to her, the timing and the details, since she had a talent for such things. Plus, it would allow him to remain anonymous.

But he hadn't said anything about Kam being at the same location. Maybe he didn't know. Daegal certainly knew, if the spy had kept him informed. If Daegal was keeping information from her contact, he might suspect some sort of betrayal. On the other hand, if the spy was withholding information from Daegal, then he was probably trying to work a better deal. She'd have to be extra careful from here on out.

She began to believe that she should just go ahead with her own plan. Not give anyone an advantage that could be used against her, if they didn't already know this information. Several Xylons might have survived, as Kam had. And in the same location.

A slow smile crossed her face as her fingers stroked the control device.

She'd had to engage the controller for the tracker to also engage. The test had gone well. She knew Kam had felt the effects, for she'd monitored the change in his body. She'd disengaged the controller once she had what she needed.

Now that she knew exactly where he was she could begin taking over his actions. How much control she'd exert depended on whether the others were with him. Once she made contact, she'd know.

She didn't trust anyone to do this but herself. She stood and walked off the command level and headed toward her quarters, where she'd have privacy. Her heart rate kicked up with each step. If what she suspected was correct, her goal would be much closer, achieved much sooner, than she'd ever dreamed possible.

Fate and the ability to manipulate others made life so incredibly tasty.

Chapter Eight

Planet Xylon

Auxiliary Underground Shelter

Frustration rolled through Briggs. He was tired of waiting. He could be putting his time to better use than standing here in the middle of the conference room, waiting for someone to tell him what to do, as if he were some lackey. He was accustomed to being the one giving orders, not being in the position of an observer with no say in what was going on.

He glanced up at the cameras mounted in the corners. He was not thrilled about this ceremony being recorded.

For a brief moment, a vision of some sex tape of him spreading across Earth's internet filled his mind. He could see the caption now. *Aliens fuck with U.S. Military*. Literally. He'd bet that would get a hell of a lot of downloads.

On the flip side, he pictured the video being used to teach future medical personnel about the new rite, if it ever had to be repeated to get more chemically altered sperm for the needed shots. Not the way he wanted to go down in history.

He'd rather be memorialized for his military service than the workings of his dick.

Brianna was the main woman he'd be fucking, along with possibly one or two others. He couldn't refuse to participate. But he didn't intend to just roll over and let them, well, butt-fuck him to their hearts' content.

He and Brianna had been through a lot together. He felt a connection with her and he didn't want to use her simply as a cum receptacle. Even for an experiment. Brianna deserved more than this kind of cold joining. Cold, unemotional, since he wouldn't be letting his innermost feelings run free while others watched. Physically, he suspected they might burn down the walls.

He was feeling as if his time was growing short. He needed to report again. To warn his superiors about the planned spinal fluid extractions, since he didn't know how much they'd been told. Probably not everything because he couldn't imagine them sending him all the way out here without being fully informed.

As he headed toward the door, determined to take some action while he had the chance, Laszlo entered, stopping him in his tracks. *Damn*.

He wiped all emotion from his face, determined to keep his feelings to himself. He had to remember that this was a military operation and these people, though not the enemy, were not necessarily his friends. An image of Brianna came into his mind but he pushed thoughts of her aside before he said or did something contrary to his military training.

He immediately picked up a bad vibe as he studied Laszlo. The look on the man's face was definitely not good. He almost hesitated to ask—more trouble was not what they needed. "Problem?"

Laszlo dragged a hand down his face. "Only minor, but aggravating. We're going to have to delay the ceremony a bit. Something is not coming out right in the tests."

Even though the man had said minor, the tone in his voice made it sound like anything but. If they couldn't perform the ceremony and get the formula they needed for the injections perfected, Earth would certainly fall into the hands of the Egesa, for the military couldn't protect the planet with no immunity from the alien poisons and diseases he'd been told about. "Just aggravating, not serious?"

"No. I really don't think it's going to be a major problem. The levels in the drugs we need to give you are just a little off from what I'd like them to be for the best effect. I'll get Leila's help and we'll straighten it out. In the meanwhile, use the extra time to rest. You'll need all your strength and endurance for later."

He decided not to ask anything further about the formula but to wait and see if they could get things fixed. Concentrating on the negative did no good. Besides, there wasn't anything he could do to help correct the problem. On the up side, with everyone busy, maybe he could finally find a quiet corner to transmit from. "Actually, getting some rest sounds good to me."

"Use my private quarters. You won't be bothered there and it has a real bed."

Briggs eyed him in surprise. He was offering his own quarters? That sounded almost too good to be true. He'd have complete privacy and could take his time reporting to Earth. A real bed would be a nice treat as well. He hadn't slept much lately. "Are you sure?"

A smile crossed Laszlo's face. "I won't be using it. I think you'll find the room very appealing."

* * * * *

*Planet Earth, State of Colorado, U.S.A.
Underground Tracking Facility*

Jaeda sat on her bunk with her back pressed against the wall and her legs crossed. Kirk sat in a chair across from her with a mug of coffee in his hand. The aroma made her nauseous and her head hurt. This had not been a good day.

"Sure you don't want a sip?" he offered.

"I'm sure. Do you have anything that'll give me a buzz? I'll take some of that, if you do."

"Alcohol?"

She nodded. She wasn't much of a drinker but right about now a shot would go a long way to numbing her out. Besides, she was off duty and entitled after the day she'd had.

"Not on me." His eyes filled with concern.

"Too bad." Kirk had been a good friend to her and he always listened. He didn't go about constantly trying to prove how great he was, nor did he make excuses if he screwed up. She respected that. They made a good team.

Silence hung in the air between them. A comfortable silence, as was only experienced between friends.

"So, what did the General say?" he finally asked, after taking a sip from his mug. "How'd he take the news?"

She'd rather not think about that. Her head still pounded from their encounter. "Let's just say he was less than thrilled."

"I'm sure. But is he going to act?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Since we don't have any real proof of what that blip was, he wasn't immediately impressed. He's going to get back to us on it after he and his staff study the reports."

"What about the message from Briggs?"

"You know that came in garbled."

"But we extracted some of it."

"Not enough in his estimation to properly interpret the transmission." Enough in her estimation, combined with their computer readouts, to know that something bad was headed their way, just as predicted. They needed to prepare now. Not wait for absolute confirmation. It could be too late then.

They had no way of contacting Briggs and requesting a retransmit of his message to confirm one way or the other the status of the project. Taking the warning signs too lightly could prove deadly in the end. She understood caution but it seemed as if they were being too cautious.

Maybe the General was acting behind the scenes without her knowledge. She wouldn't put that past the military and had actually begun to suspect such even before now. These people weren't stupid, after all. Nor were they the bad guys, so she supposed she needed to show a bit more trust, hard as that might be for her.

"So what do we do?"

"Keep monitoring. I'll pull in a couple of favors. We might be able to get some additional information from my sources." Since working here, she'd felt so cut off from everything she'd known before. She barely had time to keep connected with the important people in her life. Now she needed their help.

"Do I want to know from whom?" He eyed her curiously.

"No." Though Kirk had been a good friend, she'd still kept a few things about herself from him.

Complete trust of anyone did not come easily to her. Self-preservation did.

He chuckled and stood from the chair. "All right, boss." He checked his watch. "Get some rest. I'm on in fifteen. You've got six hours. Make use of the time."

"Oh yes. I'm going to enjoy those hours." Her body tingled, looking forward to a long sleep, for she knew exactly who was waiting for her in her dreams—a sexy man, with a very lickable cock.

* * * * *

Planet Xylon
Auxiliary Underground Shelter

Brianna turned off the computer. She hadn't found any sign of Daegal via the deep space tracker. So, basically, they knew nothing more than they had known before she'd started the search. Not that it had surprised her. If Daegal was well on his way and past the mid-galaxy marker, they likely wouldn't be able to pick him up with the outdated equipment down here.

She'd alerted Braden in the control room about her findings or lack thereof. He hadn't been happy. Without proof one way or the other, they pretty much had to take Laszlo at his word. The consequences for Earth were too severe if they didn't and he was right. Not knowing when Daegal would reach Earth, if indeed he was on his way, made the situation even more grave.

She stretched out on Laszlo's bed. After sleeping on a mat all these nights—well, sleeping maybe, but not restfully—a soft, thick padding beneath her felt great. She'd checked in with Laszlo again briefly, after contacting Braden, and knew the Initiation had been delayed. Nothing seemed to be going their way lately. Her nerves and her emotions were shot.

Thinking to get some sleep, she let her eyes drift closed. But she didn't feel sleepy. She felt itchy...or something. With a sigh, she shifted positions, hoping it would help her feel more comfortable. She really did need to relax. Once the ceremony got under way, she'd need all her energy and then some.

With her eyes still closed, her hands slid down her uniform, lightly massaging her body. Her earlier sexual thoughts returned. She wondered what they meant, if anything. Normally, she had more control over her daydreams, if that's what they were, but these odd visions seemed to pop up at the most inopportune and unusual moments. If she didn't know better, she might even have believed they were breeder visions. But that was impossible, for her object of lust wasn't a Xylon male.

She opened the front of her uniform and slipped out of the garment. She knew she had plenty of time to herself and wouldn't be disturbed. Maybe she could finally get that sexual relief she'd needed so badly earlier. With the Initiation delayed, she felt

justified in taking care of herself so she could relax. Then she'd sleep and be fully refreshed later for the ceremony.

An image of Sam entered her mind and she smiled. She'd been burning to fuck that man for a while now but too much had been happening. The Initiation wouldn't exactly be the best circumstances either. Not with all the people who would be watching. They wouldn't be able to express their feelings except physically. Nothing wrong with that but she wanted some private time with him. To tell him how she felt.

She paused as she wondered...

How *did* she feel about Sam? She wasn't certain. Confused mostly, she supposed, for she hadn't known him that long but still felt as if they were connected or destined, which sounded crazy.

According to Laszlo, if they got out of here, she would have a very long life—barring any accidents or further tragedies. Sam would not, so any thoughts of a long-term relationship would be difficult. Not to mention the fact that she'd either have to go to Earth or he'd have to follow her to some other planet if they wanted to be together. Would one of them really turn their back on their people and their duty to be with the other?

Of course, thinking long term at all at this point seemed unreasonable. Reckless even. She didn't know why it was even plaguing her. It was just that losing so much, so quickly, made her want to grab on to life with both hands and not hesitate or be overly logical or analytical in decisions where personal pleasure played a part.

Her fingers drifted between her legs. She felt moisture and pulled off her undergarment. The ventilation system kicked on and cool air wafted over her body. Her nipples hardened and she tweaked each one. "Ooo...yes," she whispered. Her back arched as sexual sparks streaked through her.

As she massaged a breast with one hand, her other hand slid back between her legs. Her fingers dipped inside her pussy and she lightly stroked herself, teasing and stimulating her clit. "Mmm." Not as good as a hard cock or a man's mouth but she'd take it.

It had been too long since she'd experienced a good sexual release. Her life lately had been governed by duty and tragedy. She needed something that would transport her to another level, where only ecstasy existed. She played with her clit, increasing her need right to the edge. But she didn't allow herself to topple over. Not yet. She knew the longer she waited, the better it would be. Especially if she fantasized some large-cocked hunk fucking her.

She squirmed on the bed, so close to coming. "Sam..." she whispered, picturing him fucking her for all he was worth. She'd never been with an Earth man before and was more than intrigued. Ever since she'd sucked his cock, she hadn't been able to get him or the memory of his taste out of her mind. She'd like nothing more than to have his cock pumping away inside her cunt right now.

A choked groan reached her ears and her head snapped to the side. She froze, her eyes widening.

Sam. She hadn't even heard him enter.

He was looking at her with hungry eyes. His nostrils flared from his heavy breathing. She wondered if he'd heard her practically moan his name. His gaze slid down her body to the hand between her legs. She couldn't stop. Not now. She moved her hand faster, harder. He groaned. When his tongue eased out across his bottom lip, she came. Hard.

"Oh!" Her back arched and bolts of pleasure shot through her. Her vision faded and all she knew was physical sensation after physical sensation.

Somewhere in the distance she heard Sam's voice.

"Fuck."

Another wave of pleasure crashed through her, knowing he was watching her. Wishing he would touch her. Fuck her. She shook and moaned. The sexual ecstasy was almost too much. As the pleasure slowly faded, she collapsed on the mattress, amazed by the experience.

She glanced back over at him, not feeling embarrassed but feeling complete and wanting more. With him. He hadn't moved. She eased her hand from between her legs. "I didn't know you were there and I was too close." No way was she not climaxing after she'd seen him standing there watching her.

"Don't apologize."

She smiled, her heart still pounding from her orgasms. "It wasn't an apology." When he didn't respond, her smile faded. She hadn't expected him to just stand there, acting way too controlled, as if none of what happened had affected him sexually. She'd actually been surprised when he hadn't tried to touch her while she was coming. Perhaps she'd misread the look in his eyes for something other than desire. She reached for her uniform.

"Don't, Brianna." His voice came out a near growl when he said her name.

She stilled and watched him slowly approach the bed, like a wild beast stalking her. His eyes darkened and sexual sparks filled the air. Every nerve ending in her body went on alert. She hadn't been mistaken. That look said it all. He wanted to fuck her.

"Does Laszlo know you're in here?" he asked in a husky voice.

"Yes. He sent me in here to rest. What are you doing here?"

"Laszlo sent me in here to rest too."

Her heart picked up its rhythm, beating triple time. "We've been set up." And she intended to take advantage of the situation.

She turned toward him and propped herself on her elbow, trying to look as sexually appealing as possible. She felt right on the edge of another orgasm simply from his presence and knowing Laszlo wanted them together like this. The next move was his.

"Do you mind?" he asked, a distinct rumble in his voice.

Did he really need to ask her that? The look on her face, her willingness to remain naked for him and her position should speak volumes. "Not at all. You?"

His hand brushed his bulging crotch. "What do you think?"

* * * * *

Torque sat in the control room, waiting for Braden, who had left after getting a message from Brianna. Something was brewing. He recognized un-coded code when he heard it. The problem was, without knowing the subject or question, he couldn't properly interpret what he'd heard, other than the outcome was apparently not a good one. As soon as his brother returned, he intended to find out exactly what was going on.

Until then he'd concentrate on their main problem.

They needed to come up with a way to launch the orbiters without flooding the chamber with the outside poisonous gases. The Lair would have been able to handle such a problem. They would just seal off the launch areas, but this underground shelter wasn't as sophisticated in its equipment and setup. It should have been upgraded long ago. But like most things, nothing had been done because it hadn't yet been needed. Now it was too late.

Laszlo had suggested using the decontamination room, which was airtight. Probably their best bet. But it contained no internal controls—everything was controlled externally from the control room. They'd need to wire and install a system panel inside the room so he was working on the specifications now.

He paused to look toward the monitors. All shut down. He itched to switch them on to search the surface. But at the same time, he couldn't force himself to do so. She hadn't survived and he would have to accept it.

Still, his heart rebelled. Tara shouldn't have died.

After their mother had taken her own life, Tara had been the only one he'd been able to really talk to and not feel judged for his feelings and actions, which even he admitted had been out of control. They'd watched out for each other and had a special relationship all their lives. Now she was gone. Forever. It hurt like hell.

Lately, another woman had been plaguing him. Actually, pleasuring him was a more accurate description. In his dreams. A dark-haired beauty, with a passion and love of sex to match his. He found it odd that she kept making an appearance. But he wasn't complaining. Fucking her filled him. She allowed him anything and he took everything from her. His sleeping hours seemed the only time now when he really felt at peace.

Well, in truth, not just his sleeping hours, for recently, she had even filled his thoughts when he was awake. He seemed to have very little control of his fantasies with her. Somehow she kept him grounded though, so he felt grateful.

With Xylon destroyed, he'd wondered more than once what would happen to them all. Without a base to call home, either they would have to band together and find a

new home or they'd all end up going their separate ways. Never one for community in the past, perhaps because he knew one always existed for him, he now felt the loss more than he ever thought he would.

Braden entered the control room and Torque snapped himself out of his maudlin thoughts. He was the strong one, the invincible one, the older brother who never went soft. And the Warrior who defied authority if it didn't suit his liking. "Where did you rush off to?"

"I had to secure something."

Torque studied his brother. Yep. Something was definitely going on. "Anything I should know about?"

"I'll get with you on it later. For now, let's figure out this problem with the orbiters. It's our only way to get out of here and get everyone rescued."

* * * * *

Josella stepped out of Braden's and Alexa's private quarters. She wouldn't be needed for a while, so she decided to take some time for herself, though she wouldn't have minded staying. She loved those little babies and being close to Pitch was a bonus but she also didn't want to hover after Alexa had told her to take a rest.

As she headed toward the common area, she hesitated. What –

In the corridor at the far end, a passing shadow caught her attention. It had looked like Delemar, whom she realized she hadn't seen in quite a while. Not even at night when they bedded down. From the start, he'd refused to sleep on the floor mats and usually spent his nights in medical.

She turned the corner and followed him down the corridor, curious as to how he'd been spending his time and where he had been going. When he glanced behind him, her heart clenched and she pressed up against the wall. She shook her head at her reaction. What was she doing? She had as much right to be walking here as he did. He would have no reason to think she was following him.

He disappeared into the ladder well, which went in only one direction. Down. Odd. Nothing was below but the ships and engineering controls and probably a ton of other machinery. Maybe he had been making himself at home in one of the orbiters. He'd certainly have privacy there, though not much more comfort, given the age of the ships. They weren't designed with luxury in mind.

She quietly approached and glanced down the opening. She wasn't certain if she should go down there or not but curiosity got the better of her. So what if she was spying on him. No harm in that. As long as she didn't get caught. Carefully, she swung over to the ladder and started down.

As she reached the bottom, she did her best to hold back a sneeze. Dust and grime abounded. She looked in both directions but didn't see anyone in the dim light. She listened carefully and thought she heard some small clicks, so she headed in that

direction. It might just be a piece of equipment but she had to go one way or the other, so it seemed as good a choice as any.

She made her way past row after row of equipment, having no idea of its use. The clicking got louder as she continued on. When she turned a corner, she stopped abruptly and stepped back. There he was, sitting in front of a computer terminal.

She crept closer. The type on the screen was too small. She couldn't see it. The only thing she was able to make out was a series of letters and numbers in larger type on the top right. FSMF-36.

Deleamar suddenly stopped typing. He turned his head to the side and appeared to be listening.

She held her breath until he turned back and continued whatever he was doing. Silly. He didn't appear to be doing anything wrong. The other computers were in use, so it was logical for him to seek out the one down in the hole.

From all the typing, he was most likely documenting their experiences down here. That was part of a Council member's job—to keep records. She'd leave him to his work. She eased away and headed back up top.

Chapter Nine

Braden turned from a panel readout when he heard the sound of boots headed toward the control room. He recognized the unmistakable stride of a male Warrior approaching from the corridor.

An instant later, Erik entered. He came to a stop the moment they made eye contact.

When Braden looked at his best friend, he immediately knew, even before Erik said anything. Something was up. "What's going on?"

At his question, Torque flipped a switch, then turned from the computer screen. He looked up at Erik. "Damn. Something *has* happened. What is it?"

A grim expression crossed Erik's face and his gaze flickered a moment between them. "Am I that transparent?"

"The look in your eyes isn't indicative of someone bringing us good news," Braden said, alarm bells pealing in his head. "Give me a report."

"We had an overheat on one of the orbiters."

"Great," Braden muttered.

"Which one?" Torque asked.

"The long-range ship."

Braden scrubbed a hand down his face. That ship needed to be in top shape if they were going to make it to Earth. If they had to divert to the Ice Moon to find and equip another long-range orbiter, the delay could be costly. For everyone.

There was no guarantee that any long-range ships were even available and operational on the Ice Moon. If no ships were available, no force of Warriors could be quickly organized to join their existing force on Earth to help fight the Egesa, who already had a large head start on them if everything Laszlo had said was true.

With their communications grid destroyed, he doubted the Warriors currently on Earth would know the Egesa were on their way. Earth's military had been warned through Project ACE, according to Briggs, but they'd have no way of knowing the timing for the invasion and probably hadn't yet prepared sufficiently.

He knew the Egesa kept small bands of soldiers stationed on Earth, as the Xylons did. They generally kept a low profile, staying mostly underground except at night and hadn't proven to be a problem over the years. Nothing the Warriors couldn't handle anyway. Now those soldiers would be paving the way for the arrival of so many more.

"Were you able to salvage the ship?" Braden asked.

"Yes everything's fine, for now."

When that's all Erik said, Braden knew trouble was brewing. They'd worked together long enough to read each other like a security manual. "You wouldn't be here telling me a one-liner if you really believed everything was fine. You would have simply logged the incident. What happened? I want a report with some details in it and I want it now."

Erik nodded. "I was checking the weapon stores when a localized alarm went off. Something overloaded the fuel and weapon systems and then ultimately the main control systems went down. And it wasn't anything I did, unless I tripped a preprogrammed set."

"Preprogrammed?" Torque's eyes narrowed. "You think the orbiter might have been sabotaged to overload when the systems engaged?"

"I really don't know. Considering the ship's age and given how long it's been down there, it's not surprising that it had problems. Still, I thought I should report what happened in person, instead of simply logging the incident. Just in case it's more serious than a malfunction. Also, Halah was with me at the time and accused me of doing something to fry things. Her reaction seemed over the top to me."

"Meaning?" Torque asked. "You suspect she did something then tried to blame it on you?"

"Truthfully, I don't know what to think. She did help to save the fuel when we were forced to do a dump. But I don't completely trust her."

Braden knew Erik and Halah didn't get along. That attitude alone would adversely affect their judgment toward each other. "I'm sure she wants out of here as much as the rest of us. I highly doubt she'd disable either orbiter. That would lessen her odds of being selected as a crew member for the remaining orbiter, which would delay her getting out of this shelter even longer. Not to mention her sister."

"Unless she's working with someone on the outside," Torque suggested. "To sabotage us so we can't reorganize the Warriors. She might already have an alternate rescue option for herself and her sister."

"It's very possible, Braden," Erik said. "Think about it. We know she's worked for Daegal in the past. She was part of the Sand Moon mission, which ultimately failed. She was the one who failed to disarm the PowerIIRad bomb after getting into the system, when I couldn't. She's maneuvered herself into a prime position for a spy—mated to Kam, Laszlo's son. I'm sure she knew about their relationship before we did."

"Let's not get paranoid about each and every word or move someone makes, gentlemen."

"A little paranoia can sometimes save a lot of lives." Torque's words came out in a light tone but his look was serious.

Braden understood their suspicions. He'd harbored the same suspicions. But after giving it hard thought and going over all the evidence in his head, he didn't believe Halah was a traitor, or Kam either. He did believe they'd both been manipulated by Laszlo in the past and might again be manipulated in the future. As such, they

shouldn't be trusted with too much information at this point, for everyone's safety. Not until he knew for certain Laszlo's true motives and that the man could be trusted completely.

"Well, I intend to check over both ships very carefully and then lock them down," Erik said. "I don't want anyone tampering with the controls once I know they're set. I'll need to do some rewiring and reprogramming. I'm going to install a secondary bypass in the larger orbiter to make sure the malfunction doesn't happen again. If a malfunction is all it was. It might take me a while to get everything fully operational."

"You'll have time," Torque told him.

Braden turned toward his brother. "What do you mean?"

"The Initiation has been delayed. Nothing serious. Something about the drug levels being off in the injection they need to give Briggs. Laszlo said he and Leila will be able to fix the problem but it will take them a little while and further tests."

"When did this happen?" Braden asked.

"Laszlo checked in after you left the control room. I meant to update you." He shook his head. "My brain has been in a fog or something lately."

Braden sighed. What else could go wrong? No. He didn't want to think about the possibilities. He had enough to think about already. "Let's get back to work. Time's going to pass faster than we think, especially if we run into more glitches."

"How's it looking for the decontamination room?" Erik asked.

"Torque's pretty much got it figured out. It's just a matter of refining the details and laying out the steps for the installation and programming now. Then we'll need to test it, of course."

Torque nodded. "I'll have everything finalized in a couple of hours or so. We can start the actual wiring of the control panel after that. Once the wiring is in place, the program setup will take some time though. Probably about as long, if not longer, than the orbiter programming."

"Then let's get to it," Braden said with a clap of his hands.

"Wait." Torque turned his chair fully toward Braden. "Before Erik leaves, do you want to tell us what you and Brianna have been up to?"

Braden scowled. He shouldn't have alluded to anything earlier with Torque, for nothing substantial had come of it. Though he did want to make sure Torque's and Erik's loyalty remained with him over Laszlo, in case he felt the need to overrule their leader during any phase of this mission. Now was as good a time as any to do that, while they were both here and ready to know more. And while no one else was around.

"You and Brianna are planning something?" Erik asked. "Should we be insulted that we were kept out of the loop?"

"Yeah, I'd like to know why," Torque added.

"I wanted more information before getting too many people involved so I'd know which way to plan and have more to tell you. I had Brianna check the deep space

tracker to see if she could pick up Daegal's ships heading toward Earth. I wanted some sort of confirmation on what Laszlo told us."

"And?" Erik asked.

"Nothing."

"Ah, so that's what Brianna's un-coded message meant."

Braden smiled slightly. He should have known Torque would recognize un-coded code when he heard it. After so many years, he'd thought maybe the rhythm of the words wouldn't register with him anymore. It hadn't actually been necessary since no one else was in the control room when she'd reported in. But then, better to be safe when transmitting over a public comm, for anyone else in the shelter could have tapped in to listen and with the level of suspected deception down here, he preferred to keep their conversations contained within a small group.

"Too bad." Torque shook his head. "That means we know nothing one way or the other where Laszlo is concerned, as usual."

"Exactly." Braden had no choice now but to go on instinct and hope for the best. "We're going to have to follow Laszlo's orders, without proof, because the outcome for Earth is in the balance if everything he's told us is the truth. More than just Earth's freedom actually is at stake if Daegal and the Egesa have their way. But since we didn't find anything concrete, we also need to be aware that everything we've been told about Daegal and his current plans could be a lie or a —"

"Cover for something even more nefarious," Torque finished for him, a look of disgust on his face.

"If so, we'll need to be ready to shift and defend," Erik added.

"Precisely," Braden confirmed. "You're both with me and Brianna on this then? We follow Laszlo, with caution, unless I order otherwise."

"Of course," Erik replied.

"Goes without saying," Torque agreed.

"All right. Good. Torque, you finalize the details for the decontamination room. Get the installation and programming specs into the computer. Then —"

A beep drew their attention. All three turned toward a panel beside Torque, where a red light blinked. Torque pulled his chair back around and punched up a colored graph on the monitor. "Shit. Look at this."

Braden studied the screen. "Perfect," he muttered under his breath, seeing the bad news.

Their oxygen supply registered a steady and significant drain.

Maybe that's why some of their thinking had been getting cloudy. He'd noticed a certain fuzziness in himself and so had Torque apparently, given what he'd said earlier. Now with the Initiation delayed due to something being off with the drugs that Laszlo and Leila were trying to fix, he couldn't help but think that too might be related to

cloudy thinking. Even Halah's and Erik's encounter earlier could have escalated beyond the norm because of the restricted air.

With the drain, the system had automatically readjusted the levels to lower the oxygen output to save the supply, which was standard procedure for emergency shelters and rescue pods. Those levels could be overridden manually but if they couldn't find and fix the source of the drain first, even more oxygen would be wasted.

"Why is it only now alerting us?" he asked Torque. "Look at those levels. The system has to have been malfunctioning for some time."

"Who the hell knows?" Torque growled as he switched screens to get additional data on the problem. "I hate these systems down here. They're older than dirt and about as useful."

Another possible sabotage? Braden had to wonder, given the fact that the primary alarm hadn't registered. If it wasn't for the emergency secondary system kicking in and alerting them, they might never have known about the oxygen problem. Not until it was too late.

"Can we stop the leak?" Erik asked, leaning forward for a better look.

"Not without knowing where it's coming from," Torque answered, throwing up his hands in frustration. "This fucking equipment doesn't show the source."

"Do we tell the others?" Erik asked Braden, turning from the graph. A concerned look crossed his face.

"Only those who need to know. No need to create panic with everyone. I'll tell Laszlo in case he has any ideas and I'll look into it myself. Maybe I can find out where the problem originated. If that can be fixed or even patched, then it should propagate throughout the system and cause a reset of the atmospheric levels."

"Even if it doesn't reset," Torque said, "I can override but the leak needs to be fixed first or the air won't last us."

Braden now knew what he'd secured earlier had been the right thing to do. He just needed to put a rush on the setup. "Erik, I need to talk to you about something."

He pulled his friend to the other side of the room, not missing the frown on Torque's face. He wasn't purposely keeping secrets from his brother. He wanted to run something by Erik, hoping what he'd planned was possible. But specifically, he had another question for his friend, something he did want kept private. For Erik's sake, not because he didn't trust Torque. He lowered his voice and tried to sound casual. "Has Leila said anything to you about Laszlo? What's her take on all this?"

Erik seemed confused by the question and hesitated before answering. "Her take? You mean medically? She could fill you in on Laszlo's condition better than me."

"No, in general. How does she feel about everything that's been happening with Laszlo?"

"Feel?" Erik visibly tensed and his eyes narrowed. "Are you asking me whose side she's on, Braden?"

Yeah, he supposed he was, but only because of what Laszlo said during the meeting. He had to be certain of loyalties here. "I'll come right out with it, Erik. Did you know she was helping with the spinal fluid experiments?"

Erik once more hesitated before answering, though he never broke eye contact. "Yes."

Yes. The word echoed in Braden's head. He felt as if he'd been zapped by a pulse rifle. Erik should have told him about Leila's involvement as soon as he'd found out.

"I knew she was working on some secret project. I didn't know what it was until Laszlo told us."

"Leila refused to tell you what she was doing?"

"She said Laszlo would tell us in the meeting, with more details than she could provide, so I didn't push her or say anything to anyone beforehand. I trust her and her judgment, Braden. This hasn't been long-term on her part. She's only been involved with the experiments since she's been down here."

Well, that was good to hear. It meant she wasn't a part of any ongoing schemes with Laszlo.

"After the meeting she told me that Laszlo brought some of the manufactured spinal samples with him and was still trying to figure out why the artificially created fluid wouldn't work. She did some tests and also looked over the modified Initiation procedure. Made some changes. The spinal fluid was still a bust when they tested the revised vials they prepared but she's hopeful about the Initiation. You don't need to question her loyalty, Braden. She only kept quiet because she felt it better that everyone find out at the same time about Daegal going after the human spinal fluid on Earth, instead of half truths getting thrown about before Laszlo could relate the whole story."

"If we've heard the whole story. With Laszlo, that's always an unknown. I'm still trying to figure things out here."

"I know it's a fucking mess, Braden." He clasped Braden's shoulder. "We are Xylon Warriors. Family, as far as I'm concerned. First and foremost. My alliance is with you, my friend. Always."

"Even over your mate, if she should side with Laszlo?"

His eyes darkened and he shook his head. "That won't happen. Ever. Believe me. Leila's with you, Braden. I can promise you that. She feels she owes you for the sacrifice you and Alexa made for her during her re-initiation. She loves you two and those babies."

Braden could see the truth of Erik's words in his eyes and he felt better. "I want to talk to you about something else." He didn't keep his voice as low, not caring if Torque overheard them now. He pulled a small black device from his jacket. "This is the transport-connector Briggs had on him when he arrived here. It contains a much denser power pack than our normal TCs. Can you reprogram it to transport four people?"

"Four?" Erik took the device from Braden and pushed some buttons, studying the internal coding. Then he pulled off the back panel. "No. It was only wired for two maximum. Even with its additional power, the internal circuitry board needs a booster chip for increased multiples."

"Even if they're not all adults? How about if it's for one adult and three babies?"

Erik's head snapped up and their gazes locked. "You want this for Alexa? Why? There's no place she and the triplets can go from down here. A ship would have to remain in a stable orbit with known, set coordinates. You've already explained that to her. It's not powerful enough to reach any of the moons, even with a booster, so what are you thinking?"

"With its power pack, it can reach Quadrant Port XST. I've done the calculations."

Erik's brow wrinkled. "The old repair station? For what purpose? It's abandoned and barely maintains its orbit around Xylon anymore. It has no working communications, no supplies."

"But it has oxygen and automatic temperature regulation. Listen, those babies have to live. They can't live without Alexa. They all have to stay together. Given the scope of our mission and the danger, we can't put them on the orbiter to the Ice Moon. The ship isn't fully equipped with weapons for a sustained fight if the Egesa attack and we can't get backup support. It's just too risky. If we do make it to the Ice Moon, we can send back more heavily armed ships and troops to ensure the babies' safety. Everyone's safety, whoever is left behind. But I want a secondary plan in place. For even if some of us are able to get off Xylon and send back help, it might not be in time, especially now that the air is compromised. If the oxygen here does indeed last, a million other things could go wrong before rescue arrives. Alexa and the triplets need another way out in an emergency. The port will be safe if you can rig the transport-connector to get them there and also fix it so that, if she uses the device, it beeps my personal vid-cell. That way I'll know she's transported out."

"You should know anyway."

Breeder-mates held a special connection through a brand placed on the back of the female's neck during a Branding ceremony, which occurred when two Xylons were officially joined as mates. The brand established a connection between the brain chips in both mates, allowing them to know the location of the other.

Except their connection had failed when Alexa had disappeared from down here without warning. Braden had believed her dead. He didn't know for certain how the connection had been broken but he'd spoken to Leila about it and they both suspected it had something to do with Alexa's partly alien physiology not being completely compatible with the devices. He feared it might happen again. Braden didn't intend to leave anything to chance this time. "I want a backup method. I went through not knowing once. I don't ever want to go through that again. So is it possible to reprogram the transport-connector and for me to receive a signal if she uses it?"

"Our vid-cells aren't working."

"The vid-cells aren't working for direct communications but can they send and receive pulses?"

"Hmm. I don't know. I'll look into it. And into the TC reprogramming. I'll figure out a way."

He clapped Erik on the back. "Thanks." He squeezed his shoulder. "No mistakes, Erik. We can't test it. My family is in your hands."

Erik nodded, a determined look in his eyes.

Braden knew Erik would do his best. He reached into his jacket and passed his vid-cell to Erik. "Torque is going to handle the decontamination room. I'll take care of the orbiter reprogramming. I worked as an engineer for a long time on those old ships. I know a few tricks to get the most efficiency out of the systems. You concentrate on reprogramming the transport-connector and my vid-cell. Bring them to me when you're done, then we both can secure the orbiters. I'll also look into the oxygen situation while I'm down in the hole."

"We need more people helping us. Let's get someone else to look into the oxygen problem, at least, while you're working on the ship. The oxygen is imperative but trying to find that leak is going to be a real time drain and very probably will lead to zero results."

"Suggestions?"

"Brianna."

"No good. She'll have to be pulled for the Initiation once they're ready, which could happen at any time."

"Pitch?"

"I don't want to call Pitch away from Alexa. Just in case there's trouble before we expect it."

"Then Kam."

"I'm afraid his headaches combined with the lower oxygen levels might severely interfere with his thinking. I've also noticed him rubbing his throat since he's been down here. I think the implant is bothering him. We need someone who's at the top of their game right now and who can work fast, especially as the situation worsens."

Erik puffed out a heavy breath. "It will have to be Halah then, as much as I hate to admit it. Everyone else is either involved with a project or doesn't have the skills and knowledge to handle the situation."

"Agreed. Let's get her in here."

* * * * *

Briggs swallowed hard. *Brianna*. Naked. And she wanted him to stay. She wanted him to fuck her. A fantasy come true. His gaze eased down her body, memorizing every inch of her beautiful flesh.

Her breasts caught and held his interest. Full and luscious. He loved breasts. Hell, he loved women. Pure and simple. Every inch of them. All the subtle differences and nuances of their bodies and minds.

Her nipples were longer than the nipples of an average Earth female. Plumper too. And a lovely rosy color next to the beautiful creaminess of her skin. So sexy. He ached to lick and suck them.

His gaze traveled farther down her body to her pussy, which he couldn't see that well from her side position and how she'd draped her leg to partially cover herself. He did see a few black tendrils of hair peeking out, teasing him into sexual madness. He ached to stroke her pussy, to feel if the hair there was as soft as he imagined.

His heart beat erratically. Her Warrior training was evident in the fitness of her body but she still retained enough curves to look touchably soft. In fact, she looked all woman to him. The slight flush to her skin showed she was definitely affected sexually by him. Just knowing that made his own need escalate.

Watching her come earlier had been like a dream. Better than a dream actually. Another fantasy come true for him. She could have stopped if she'd wanted. But she hadn't. In fact, she'd finger-fucked herself harder. She'd wanted him to watch her come by her own hand. Making her come, by more than simply his presence, would be even better. He could hardly wait. He intended to make her come until she had nothing left to give. *Although...* The thought gave him pause because of the pending Initiation but then he dismissed any doubts.

Obviously Laszlo wanted them to fuck. Now. While in private. He wouldn't have sent him in here to her otherwise. Maybe this was Laszlo's way of making them feel more comfortable with each other, instead of their first time together being in front of others.

He wasn't about to argue with the decision. Apparently it wouldn't adversely affect them for later or Laszlo wouldn't have arranged this. So, Sam decided that he might as well relax and enjoy the ride, so to speak.

"Would you like to stay with me for a while?" Brianna asked, a sexy smile on her face.

"Hell yeah," he answered without hesitation. It would take a whole troop of Xylon Warriors to get him out of this room now. His cock was hard enough to break stone. He wasn't going anywhere until he fucked this woman—thoroughly.

She crooked her finger, motioning him nearer. Her position on the bed, her long dark hair cascading over her shoulder, the expression in her eyes, all made her look like some sex goddess.

He leaned down and gently kissed her lips. *Ah yes.* Just as luscious as he remembered. She kissed him back a little tentatively, which endeared her to him even more, for he didn't often see the softer side of her personality or emotions.

Her tenderness made him feel like pouncing on her body and fucking her like a wild man. The dominant, animalistic male in him needed her to be *his*. He'd never in his

life felt such a strong desire to possess a woman. But he wouldn't rush her. He wanted to make this good for her too. He wanted her to crave his touch long after this mission was over, and for her to always remember him, no matter what happened between them in the future.

He'd make this first time slow and tender.

When their tongues touched and she reached up, slowly at first, then practically clawing at his uniform, he lost his control. And his intentions.

With more force than he'd intended, he grabbed her wrists and pushed her down flat on the bed and covered her with his body. When she didn't protest, his mouth ravished hers, going from her lips to her tender throat and down to the full breasts he'd been aching to feast on.

Brianna mewled and arched her back.

He didn't need any more encouragement. He sucked one of her plump nipples into his mouth. *Oh yeah.* She tasted of warm cinnamon or something very close to it. A flavor he loved. Damn, he couldn't get enough.

"More," she begged.

All you want, sweetheart. He sucked harder, savoring the sweet flavor of her skin. His tongue twirled around her nipple. He released her wrists to unzip his uniform as he continued sucking and licking. His dick hurt like crazy. The thought of holding her bare body against his, flesh to flesh, was almost overwhelming.

Her fingers tangled in his hair. "Yes," she moaned, pushing her body up toward him. It wasn't long before her grip left his head to help him push down his clothing, which wasn't cooperating.

With reluctance, he released her nipple and eased off the bed. "Don't move." He pulled off his boots. Never taking his eyes from her, he shucked his uniform, getting it off with ease now that he was standing. She plucked at her nipples while he watched. Then he stepped toward the bed to join her again. He couldn't wait to find out what her pussy tasted like.

"No. Everything, Sam. Take off everything." Her fingers lowered to her cunt and she rubbed her clit.

A smile crossed his face. He had no objection to that. And no objection to her touching herself as he looked on. So sexy! He hooked his thumbs in his underwear and slid them down his legs.

Her gaze zeroed in on his cock and stayed there. From the hungry look on her face, he felt reasonably assured that she wasn't disappointed. He knew she'd seen him before, of course, touched and even sucked his cock. But this time, he was in his right mind and able to take in all the details of her responses. And appreciate each touch from her to the fullest.

She raised her fingers to her mouth and sucked off the moisture from her cunt. Fuck! She was driving him wild.

He stepped over to the bed and before he could do anything, she reached out and circled his semi-hard cock with her hand. *Ah hell, yeah.* Her fingers didn't quite meet, which made him feel awesome. His width and length had always made him popular with the ladies on Earth. He used to be considered "a catch". Or so he'd been told. He wanted her to feel the same about him.

No scratch that. It was more important to him that she feel special while she was with him. For that was truly what she was in his eyes—a very special and unique woman.

She leaned forward. The tip of her tongue brushed the tip of his cock. His hands clenched at his sides and he turned so hard he thought he might burst right there. Her tongue felt slightly rougher than a human female's. He hadn't much noticed when kissing her and he didn't remember that from the Lair but he noticed now and the additional stimulation shot right through him. His hands came up to tangle in her hair. He had to feel that sensation again. "Lick it some more, Brianna. That felt so damn great." Much better than in his fantasies.

She scooted closer and ran both her fingers and her tongue up and down his cock, paying special attention to the thick vein on the underside of his flesh, until he thought he'd explode. Then she did it. She slid her luscious lips right over the wide tip of his dick and sucked him into her mouth. His whole body shook and his fingers tightened in her hair. "I can't take much more," he forced out.

Brianna stopped for a moment but then slid down another inch. With her fingers, she lightly massaged his balls, tickling and teasing him. She definitely knew her way around a man's cock. A Xylon's or an Earthling's, it didn't seem to matter. Sam figured there couldn't be much difference between the two and he marveled at her expertise.

He groaned. "I'm going to come in your mouth if you don't stop." Not that he would mind. Hell, that would be pure ecstasy. But taking his seed down her throat was her decision to make, not his.

Brianna pulled off him and smiled. "I'd so enjoy that and would love to suck this huge fucker dry."

Huge. His chest puffed out a bit in pride.

"But I really want to feel your cock pumping away deep in my cunt, Sam. Now."

Oh, yeah. He'd fuck her good. He growled and grabbed her arms, pushing her back down onto the bed. She knew exactly how to word things to drive a man absolutely crazy. He crawled between her legs and forced her thighs apart with his knees. When he saw the moisture on the black curls covering her pussy, he knew she was as ready as he was. Very pink flesh peeked out from her slit. Much pinker than any Earth woman's. Gorgeous. Wet. Beckoning. He could actually smell her excitement.

"Do it, Sam." Her chest rose and fell with her heavy breathing. "Hard."

"Fuck." No more control. Mindless with need, he plunged his cock into that succulent-looking cunt. He'd intended to make love to her soft and slow this first time but there was no way. She wanted it hard. He'd give it to her hard.

"Yes!" she shrieked.

Her obvious pleasure gave him the encouragement he needed not to hold back. Almost rabid with the need to fuck her, he thrust into her repeatedly, holding her arms down on the bed. She wrapped her legs around his hips and held on tightly. A red haze filled his brain and all he knew was the promise of an explosive orgasm with this woman.

The muscles of her cunt massaged his cock, driving him sexually insane. Her flesh gripped him tightly. No part of his cock remained untouched. The ecstasy built so high inside him that he felt almost on a different level of existence. He couldn't hold out any longer. With a roar, he came, shooting his cum deep inside her. The pleasure seemed to last forever. He'd never felt anything so powerful in his life.

Yes, yes, yes. Her little mewls of pleasure added to his explosive release until he had no cum, no energy left. Finally, spent physically and touched emotionally more than he'd ever expected, he released his hold on her and collapsed.

Their heavy breathing surrounded them for several moments. The only sound in the room. Then a sound somewhere between satisfaction and sorrow escaped her lips. Lightly, she stroked the back of his neck. Her touch felt right and "meant to be".

With effort, he shifted his weight, trying not to crush her. "Damn, Brianna," he whispered.

Her fingers halted on his skin. "Is that a good damn or a bad one?"

"Both."

"Hmm." Her confusion was evident in the tone of her response. Her hand drifted down his back, then away from his body. "Do I get the good or the bad explanation first?"

He didn't hesitate, not wanting there to be any misunderstanding between them. "The good." He shifted and looked into her eyes. "Is Xylon sex normally that powerful or was that all us?"

"Powerful?" she repeated in a low voice, her eyes widening in what looked like wonder.

"It was the best damn come I can ever remember having." Which was the truth. When a smile lit her beautiful green eyes, he lightly kissed her lips. Now the bad part. "I know you didn't come. I'm sorry about that. And it never occurred to me in the moment but I didn't use a condom. Not that I have one with me."

"A what?"

"A condom to prevent pregnancy, if it's even possible for me to impregnate you." He still wasn't quite sure how all that worked. But it was a tantalizing thought, he suddenly realized.

"It's possible. But don't worry. I can't get pregnant right now. It's not a Breeder Release."

"A what?" Now it was his turn to sound confused.

"Xylon retains strict medical control over breeder cycles, so don't worry."

"Even now, with everything gone."

"I—" Her brow furrowed. "I...don't know. But it must be under control or Leila would have said something, with the Initiation coming up and all."

Strangely, no sense of panic hit him at her uncertain words. He wasn't so sure of Brianna's feelings from the look on her face.

Suddenly, she shook her head, then smiled. "Let's get back to the *best come* you can ever remember having. Really? Was it that good for you?"

"Really. It was phenomenal. I should have waited for you but I couldn't control it." He rolled onto his back.

She turned toward him and snuggled against his side. "That's all right. I've come already. Besides, we have time. I trust you're going to take really good care of me."

"Damn right." He massaged her arm. He wasn't letting her leave this room until she'd come multiple times—by his hand, his mouth, and definitely his cock.

For the first time in a long while, he felt at peace. He felt complete. Okay, that sounded sappy, like when the young airmen in his command used to come to him, saying they were in love with some girl they'd just met. But he couldn't think of any other way to describe it. Though love was a way-over-the-top description in his case and not something on his radar. He wasn't that far gone yet. He was just enjoying a beautiful, sexy, intelligent woman while he was able.

Unfortunately, he knew that as soon as they left this room, all of their problems would return. Whatever enjoyment they shared in here would be short lived at best.

He only wished—no. He banished the thought before it even fully formed in his head. This was not the time or the place for wishes. He was with Brianna and she was his only for as long as Laszlo gave them to be together.

* * * * *

Halah stood with her hands on her hips. She couldn't imagine why she'd been summoned to the control room, unless Erik had complained to Braden about her calling him out on the problem with the orbiter. Damn male egos.

The only useful part of a man was his cock. If that. Except when it came to Kam. He'd proven to be a man she could truly trust. In bed and out.

Still, she didn't regret her words to Erik, for something was not right. She knew it and had never been shy about voicing her opinion when she felt the need. Whether Erik was responsible for the orbiter overheat or someone else, she didn't know. But what had happened wasn't a simple malfunction. The sequence of events was enough proof of that for her. She just wished she'd been down in the hole with him to have seen exactly what he'd done, instead of up top, working the control panel. She'd been looking into it further but hadn't found out anything specific to report. Yet. "All right. I'm here. What's up?"

Braden motioned toward the graph on the computer screen. "Look at this."

She stepped over and peered at the information. It took her a moment to decipher the readings. When she did, her stomach clenched. "Well, hell. That's not good."

"We need you to fix the leak. Everyone else is tied up with other assignments."

"Everyone else?" She cocked an eyebrow. "Nice to know I was your last choice." When Braden's eyes narrowed, she knew she'd overstepped her bounds and looked away.

All the problems and the mistrust directed toward her and Kam was taking its toll on her. On both of them, actually. If she was feeling the strain, she couldn't imagine what Kam was going through, since he'd always considered these people his friends and his family. It had to be so much harder on him. He rarely spoke of his feelings these days but she had seen his hurt and disappointment on more than one occasion. "Where's the source?"

"This equipment wasn't set up to indicate the source. We need you to find it. It's a long shot but we have to try. Time is an issue, so get on it."

Halah turned and walked toward the control room exit. "Fucking equipment," she whispered.

"She's got a way with words," Torque replied. "But she's disrespectful as hell."

"Not any more than you, asshole," she called back from the other side of the open doorway. "I'll be down in the ventilation shaft."

When she heard the men laugh, she couldn't help but smile. But she sobered quickly, thinking of the job she needed to do. An access hole was located right outside the control room, so she didn't have far to go.

No wonder Kam's headaches had been so bad lately. He was probably more susceptible to the oxygen drain than the rest of them, given his genetics and already existing headache problem.

Odds of finding the leak were not good, as Braden had said. Not without computer assistance. And with so many people down here, using up the supply... She shook her head. She hoped the others could get the decontamination room set up soon.

After some of them were gone from the shelter, the oxygen would last the rest of them longer. She didn't know if she'd be assigned to either orbiter but she was reasonably certain that her sister would not be.

Josella deserved to survive. She'd been through a lot. But unlike herself, none of her problems were of her own causing. Halah couldn't say the same. She'd made too many mistakes in her life to count but was now trying to do the right thing. If people would let her.

As she headed toward the ventilation equipment, a bright light caught her eye. Someone had been down here using the subcontrol station's computer system and left the screen on. "Hello?" she called out.

When nobody answered, she walked over to the monitor. "Waste of energy." Before she flipped off the system, the letters and numbers in the upper corner of the screen drew her eye. "No fucking way."

Halalah glanced around. Was this a joke or a trick or was it a stupid mistake on someone's part? After making certain nobody was lurking anywhere nearby, she pulled out the chair, sat down and began typing.

She intended to get to the bottom of this. First the orbiter overheat, then the oxygen leak and now a comm-link, somehow, with an outside vessel from the Sand Moon.

Her heart pounded against her ribs, for she recognized the call signature. If this was legitimate, someone down here was a traitor.

Chapter Ten

Planet Earth, State of Colorado, U.S.A.

Underground Tracking Facility

In her quarters, Jaeda struggled to disconnect the special handheld device from the adapter on the communication panel. Her fingers trembled and she tightened her hands into fists to steady her nerves. "Get a grip," she mumbled. Not many things in her life had rattled her like this but she'd received very disturbing news from her people. Devastating news.

Trying to calm herself, she took in a deep breath and held it in her lungs before slowly letting the air ease out. She had to keep her wits about her and report what she'd learned.

She stashed the adapter in her desk and pushed the handheld comm into her pocket, then checked the time. Perfect. She flipped on the facility's comm and switched to a private internal channel. "Kirk?"

He should be in his quarters this time of day, resting between shifts. He didn't hang out much in the staff lounge during his time off, so she was reasonably certain that he would be in his assigned quarters right now. At least, she hoped so, for she didn't want to have to hunt him down.

After a short delay, a response filtered through. "Kirk here."

At the sound of his voice, she breathed a sigh of relief. "I need you to meet me outside General Adair's office immediately. Consider this a priority."

"On my way," came his immediate response.

No questions, just compliance. He no doubt had recognized the urgency in her voice. She appreciated Kirk, as a colleague and a friend, more than he would ever know. He was someone she could count on whenever she needed him.

Knowing that time might be of the essence, she flipped off the speaker and rushed out into the corridor. She didn't have an appointment but the General would see her. If she had to, she'd refuse to leave until he did. Though she doubted she'd have much of a problem once he found out what she was there to report.

Jaeda couldn't believe this had happened. But her people were thorough and wouldn't report something like this without checking into it first. Still, it all seemed so impossible.

Although she didn't have full details yet, and no proof to supply, the military needed to know. Whether they believed her or acted on the information after she told them would be their decision.

The General's office was located on the second level down from the top. It didn't take her long to make her way up from the lower levels in the elevator and reach the office suite. Kirk exited an adjacent elevator almost at the same time.

"What's going on?" A look of concern crossed his features as he fell into step beside her.

"I'll fill you both in at the same time. It'll be easier." She didn't want Kirk left out of the loop. He knew almost as much as she did about the projects going on at the facility and he was cleared for top-secret access. Better that he found out now instead of having to be brought up to speed later.

When they reached the end of the hall, he opened the door to the secretary's office then followed her inside. The secretary immediately looked up. A confused look crossed her face. She peered down at her appointment book.

"We don't have an appointment, Carol," Jaeda began. "But we need to talk to General Adair right away. It's a security issue."

"Everyone has a security issue when they come here," the secretary muttered, looking over the General's schedule.

"This is an international security emergency, Carol."

The woman's head snapped up and her eyes widened.

The phrase "international security emergency" got them ushered in immediately. Carol knew that she wasn't one to toss around that type of warning casually. Jaeda had felt Kirk's nervousness at her perilous-sounding words and she knew he must be anxious to find out what was going on.

Carol left them in the inner office and now they stood waiting before the General. *He is a formidable-looking man, even sitting down*, Jaeda thought. Tall, big, fit, with a rugged face marred by the wrinkles and scars of a man who had seen too much tragedy in his life and career.

"What's this about?"

He barked out the question. His normal mode of speaking, Jaeda had long ago learned. She'd also learned not to be intimidated by him. It was how she'd finally earned his respect. "I've received some disturbing information."

He indicated for them to sit in the brown leather chairs in front of the desk. "I'm listening."

She decided not to mince words. "Xylon may have been destroyed."

"What?" Kirk asked, total shock in his voice.

The General's eyes narrowed but he didn't say anything.

"I'm not sure when the planet and Xylon's society supposedly fell. I also don't know if Colonel Briggs is still alive. He obviously survived long enough to send the last transmission. Maybe the destruction was why his message came in garbled. There's a significant delay with the communication device Briggs is using, from when he would have sent his transmission to when we finally received it. So there's no way of telling

whether he sent it before or after the attack on Xylon. I'm thinking after, given what we were able to extract from the message. If so and he survived, there may also be some Xylon survivors. But from what I've been told, the devastation was nearly total."

"How did it happen?" Kirk asked.

"Unknown at this time. I think that the strange blip we picked up could be related to all this. My guess is that it's a fleet of ships."

"Ships? Are you sure?"

She shook her head, glancing in Kirk's direction, but continuing to speak directly to the General. "There's no way to tell for certain unless they pop back up on our trackers, which is unlikely if they're cloaked."

It bothered her that the General hadn't commented on what she'd related so far. Concentration was evident on his face however, so she knew he was listening intently. "I'll try to find out more as I can. But I have reason to believe, if that blip is a fleet, the ships belong to the Egesa Slave Masters and they are on their way here. Now. In force. They are the only ones capable of taking Xylon down. No other society that I'm aware of has the fighters or the fire power."

The General took in a noticeable breath. "Might have been. Supposedly. You think. Reason to believe. Where'd you get this information that sounds shaky at best?"

"I have contacts." When he looked about to ask her another question, she cut him off. Not a smart thing to do but she knew where he was headed. "That's as much as I can say for now. Please."

It surprised her when he settled back in his chair instead of pushing. Even if he had pushed, she wouldn't have revealed her sources. Not at this point. That wasn't her right.

"What makes you think that blip is these Egesa? Maybe it's the surviving Xylons or one of our other alien allies," the General offered as an alternate explanation.

"They would have contacted us. Whoever is out there is heading this way in secret. They didn't count on us being able to pick them up. This is serious, General. I can feel it." Her stomach churned, waiting for his response.

"If it's true." His voice actually softened for the first time.

"Yes." She twisted her fingers in her lap, wishing she had a mirror into his thoughts.

"Well then..." He stood up. "We better start making plans."

* * * * *

Nav-Control Ship FSMF-36, Deep Space

Frost stretched out her legs as she eased onto her bunk. She adjusted the padding behind her and leaned back against the wall. "My plan will change the entire future of

the universe." A bold statement, but one she fervently believed. A smile crossed her face and she did nothing to squelch it.

Now that she'd made contact, she would slowly unravel the Warriors' plans, one by one. "I only wish I had a vid-monitor down there that I could access, to see the havoc." She laughed.

She fingered the controller around her neck. She only needed four of the Xylons to survive. The rest were expendable.

Her other contact, the one aboard Daegal's ship, had made a grave mistake by giving her key information. Men were so easy to control. Give them a little attention to stroke their ego and a lot of sex to satisfy their libido and they became completely whipped.

Soon she would put the next step of her plan into motion.

After she convinced him it was finally time to get rid of Daegal, she would get rid of him. Ah, so perfect. Neither of them would ever see it coming. He'd thought he would be the one attaining control of the quadrant and possibly Earth too, once Daegal was dead. He would be surprised when the real truth hit him in the mask.

She leaned forward and pressed the button on her comm panel. "Rave?"

A moment later, the woman's voice came over the system. "Rave here."

"Put together an M-6 Security Team and have them stand by."

After a slight hesitation, Rave answered, "Will do."

She needed to send the team of Egesa back before they got too far from Xylon for their short-range orbiters to reach the planet safely. She didn't want to spare more long-range ships than necessary if she didn't have to. That could put her own safety at risk. The Egesa wouldn't be able to land on the planet due to the destruction but she'd gotten the coordinates they needed to dematerialize directly into the Warriors' location.

She could contact the Sand Moon and send in a separate team, but she needed soldiers she could trust to do the job correctly, without her standing over them. Normally she didn't trust the Egesa—hell, she didn't trust anyone—but those she'd brought with her were her most loyal soldiers, her top men, and she knew they wouldn't let her down.

Once they captured those she needed, everyone else could be discarded. Laszlo worried her some. He was a powerful man. Not one to underestimate. "But he should be much weaker now. Like Daegal." In the end, he would fall, for her soldiers would be well armed. And the Warriors wouldn't know when to expect them.

If the spy had done as instructed, they'd know she was coming, though. Trapped in the small shelter with limited weapons, systems going off line, and in a panic over her soldiers coming for them... It should create enough havoc and fear that taking all of them down would be much easier.

And she held another advantage. She knew exactly how many there were and who had survived. That knowledge had helped her to figure out just how many soldiers to send back to get the job done quickly.

"Maybe their own paranoia will kill them before my team even gets there." Which would be fine with her, as long as the four she needed survived.

She gripped the controller in her palm, itching to engage the device that would trigger Kam. He could help her out before her men arrived. But now that she knew the triplets were there in the shelter, it would be too dangerous. She didn't want to chance his accidentally hurting the babies.

Actually, she only really *needed* the babies but she wanted Kam too. Her trophy. Controlling Kam, fucking him until his cock turned raw, would be the ultimate show of power over Laszlo. It would also be sweet revenge for Kam's betrayal of her on the Sand Moon.

Daegal and Laszlo, they always believed themselves to be so invincible. Now everyone would believe *her* to be invincible. The woman who would bring them both down and who would turn Laszlo's son into her own personal sex slave.

She could practically taste her victory. "So sweet."

When she'd found out that Braden's mate, a Super-breeder, had definitely born the triplets foretold in the old legends, a coveted Reign of Three, she'd been almost giddy with power. For they were her ticket to universal control. That news had been better than finding out that Kam and Alexa were Laszlo's offspring. Better than learning about the current Reign of Three and that their powers had waned.

Reign of Three. A phrase rarely heard anymore, for it had originated so long ago. She would guess that most had no concept of its meaning.

Students were no longer taught the old ways. But she had been voracious for knowledge. She'd become an eager student of old and new philosophies. She believed in the old powers. Finding out about Laszlo, Daegal and the Top Commander's genetic connection and longevity had solidified those beliefs in her mind as fact instead of symbolic, historical fantasy.

She *must* obtain those triplets as her own. "You will come to me, to your new mother soon, my babies." They'd never know the truth of their parents. They would love and serve her instead, and through them, she would rule the universe.

She'd already spoken to her personal Healer and he'd assured her that they were well equipped to tend and feed the little ones. That had been good news, for she hadn't wanted to have to put up with Alexa's presence. Once they were in her possession, Frost would have a security force escort the triplets to a safe location far away, where she would eventually join them. As soon as her mission here was completed.

For a brief moment, she contemplated saving Braden along with his children, having him take Kam's place. Or maybe keeping them both. Ah, to be fucked by both of those hunky Warriors at the same time.

"No." Better that she didn't. Braden brought out a softer side of her. She'd had to constantly fight those feelings when she was with him. She didn't need those kinds of feelings churning inside her anymore now than she had then.

She was better off with a man of power, whom she found fuckable, but she didn't care what he felt or thought. Besides, with the remote, she could control Kam. She'd have no such control over Braden. Capturing him would be a waste of energy and would only cause her more problems in the end, especially with the triplets in her care. He'd never be a docile and cooperative sex slave or give up his parental responsibilities without a fight.

Could she live with ordering Braden's death though? As long as she wasn't there to see it happen—sure. She could be cold when she needed to be. Over the years, she'd earned the name Torque had given her. He'd obviously seen something in her then that she hadn't even yet acknowledged at the time.

Well, that was all right. Tender feelings were for the weak. Wealth and power lasted a lot longer than any relationship she'd ever seen. If she needed more, she'd buy a man who would suit her purposes, one who would serve her and no other. She chuckled. "Yes. That sounds like a fucking good plan."

* * * * *

Planet Xylon
Auxiliary Underground Shelter

Still relaxing in bed, Brianna looked into Sam's sexy brown eyes, which reminded her of hot, liquid coco-ale. Such a sinful indulgence. Certainly not one she would ever turn down.

He ran his fingers lightly along her sides. She giggled and twitched, feeling more at ease than she had in a long while. She wished this time with him could last forever.

"You're amazing, you know that?" he said softly.

"How so?" She smiled down at him. Here with him, she could forget about the bad in her life and let her worries float away. It was just what she'd needed after all the tragedy that had occurred.

"You're the perfect woman."

Her smile faded. Though she appreciated the compliment, perfect was not something she wanted to live up to. "Don't put me up so high that I have nowhere to go but down, Sam. I'm far from perfect, believe me. I have my faults, just like everyone else."

A soft smile crossed his face. His fingers slid down her back to rest gently on her ass. "Faults. Yes, well, I really didn't mean that I was expecting absolute perfection from you. Perfection is boring and overrated. I should have said that you're the perfect woman for me, just as you are. Faults and all." His voice lowered with each word.

The perfect woman for me. His words echoed in her head and set her heart to fluttering.

Had he just revealed a part of his heart to her? They were in an intense situation right now and emotions were equally intense because of it. As a Warrior and command officer, she understood the stresses of battle and how that played on one's feelings. "So much has happened in a short amount of time," she replied, slowly feeling him out. "I won't later hold you to anything you say in here, Sam."

As he massaged her butt, something in his gaze changed. His look intensified.

"Hold me to everything, Brianna, because I meant every word. I don't know what's going to happen in the future or if there will even be a future. For any of us. But I know there's something special happening between you and me. Truthfully, I was trying to downplay it in my mind but I can't. Not if I'm honest."

A lump closed off her throat. She hadn't expected such an admission.

A slight flush colored his cheeks. "Geez." He laughed. "I'm no good at this emotional shit. I think this is all getting kind of deep and is probably really bad timing, considering everything that has happened and is going on right now. How about we leave the mush for later when things are more settled?"

"Mush?" She laughed slightly, still reeling from his confession.

"Yes. Besides, your body is distracting me. I'm thinking definite naughty thoughts right now. Maybe I can distract you into thinking naughty thoughts too. Hmm?"

"That shouldn't be too hard."

"Good." He squeezed her ass. "How's this feel?"

"Mmm. Yes. That's nice." It was probably best to concentrate on the physical at the moment. Less dangerous to her heart. "But I really need your cock inside me."

"Not yet." Sam rolled her over onto her back.

His gaze burned into hers like a man possessed. A sexual thrill raced through her body as she wondered what he had in mind. He lowered his head and kissed her neck, sending waves of pleasure rippling through her. The touch of his lips made her whole being ache. She wanted him like crazy.

When he didn't enter her, she thought he'd go for her nipples again but his mouth slid right between her breasts, over her ribs and stomach and down between her legs. "Ah...yes." Her cunt throbbed for his touch. She spread her thighs, perfectly willing—no eager—to accept the touch of his lips.

She watched him spread the folds of her pussy with his fingers. At the first moist swipe of his tongue along her flesh, she groaned. It had been too long since someone had licked her cunt. She wanted more. But when he licked her again, touching her clit, she couldn't find her voice to speak her desire. The best she could do was mewl and grab his head.

Sam teased her clit with the tip of his tongue until she thought she'd go mad. She dropped her hands from his hair and clawed at the bedding beneath her, arching her

hips, wanting so much from him. Needing everything he was willing to give her, physically and emotionally. Finally, his lips closed around her fleshy bud and he sucked.

He pushed his finger into her cunt. After a moment, he pulled his finger out and burrowed beneath her. She felt him probing for her asshole. Oh yes! His moist finger slipped inside her easily and went deep.

She was in such need that it only took a moment. Her body exploded, the force of the orgasm so powerful that Brianna felt as if she were dying from the pleasure. She heard her own shrieks of ecstasy and was unable to control her voice or responses. Her body no longer belonged to her but to Sam as his mouth and hands took her higher than any man ever had.

After what seemed an eternity, she collapsed, unable to move or speak. Barely able to breathe. A tear slid down the side of her cheek.

Sam shifted and moved up beside her. He kissed another tear away when it escaped her eye. He looked at her tenderly, showing his caring in the depths of his gaze. He stroked her cheek and throat and breasts, not in a sexual manner, but as if needing to take care of her. He held her close, in silence, letting her feel what she was feeling.

Brianna couldn't look away from this amazing man. When Sam had said "powerful" earlier, he had described it perfectly. Their sex *was* powerful.

This quiet time, after such a shattering experience, solidified their connection. Something special bound them together now. Something that went beyond the sex and resided within their souls. As strange as that sounded, this had not been a normal joining. She would swear to it.

* * * * *

Braden headed toward the orbiters docked below. Erik had explained to him the problem with the overheat. He felt confident that he'd be able to rewire and program a bypass system into the larger orbiter without too much trouble. The smaller orbiter was newer and wouldn't need the same adjustment.

The older orbiters always did have overheat problems. Ever since the control systems in them had been upgraded. All those ships should have been scrapped long ago. They just couldn't handle the newer technology. Still, that didn't mean he was discarding the possibility of sabotage.

He'd volunteered for this job because he wanted Erik's full concentration to be on fixing the transport-connector for Alexa and the triplets. Braden trusted Erik more than anyone else with his family's safety. Erik knew specialty codes better than most. Torque and Kam were also skilled with codes, and Halah too, but Erik knew handheld device programming inside and out.

Braden knew how Erik felt about Alexa. The three of them held a unique bond, forged on Earth during the Initiation of Alexa and it hadn't waned since. Yes, Erik loved

Leila with all his heart. They were predestined breeder-mates who'd seen breeder visions, just as he and Alexa had experienced. But Braden had no doubt that Erik would protect Alexa with his life.

As he passed near the ventilation equipment, he frowned. He didn't see or hear Halah. Maybe she'd found a possible leak from the panel readouts down here and had gone to check it out. He hoped so, for that would be one less worry if they could get the atmospheric levels fixed. Fixing the oxygen would also give them more time, which they desperately needed right now with all the problems cropping up.

He strode past the subcontrol area and immediately stopped. Halah was sitting at the computer, typing frantically. Maybe she was reprogramming the ventilation software. He'd barely heard the noise, since the atmospheric units had kicked on shortly after he arrived. Fortunately a Xylon's hearing was quite acute. A gift that came in handy on many occasions.

His eyes narrowed as he approached her from behind. Whatever she had up on the screen didn't look like ventilation code. Not that he was a coding expert but he'd dealt with ventilation code as an engineer and it looked to him as if she were examining communication codes.

Being only half Xylon, her hearing wouldn't be as good as his, which worked in his favor, for she didn't hear him approaching. As he got closer, he not only verified his suspicions about the code but he couldn't believe what he was actually seeing on the screen. Erik had been right. He grabbed her upper arms and jerked her out of the chair.

"What the hell!" She struggled, until she saw who it was. "Braden? You scared me to death. What are you doing?"

He kept her arms pinned behind her, knowing she could zap him with her electrical powers if he didn't. "You're working for Frost!"

"What? No!"

"I saw her ship's identification code on the screen, Halah."

"I know. It was there when I came down. I was checking into it, trying to figure out who had contacted her and how."

"You're working for her and Daegal, just like before." He pulled her over to some insulated piping and tied her wrists to the tubes with his belt. She didn't struggle, only looked at him in frustration. But then, if she had struggled, she'd look that much guiltier.

"Braden, I'm loyal to the Warriors. I only worked for Daegal because I had to, so I could get Josella back. You know that."

"I also know that you switched your alliance back to the Warriors only after you found out that we had located and retrieved Josella from one of the banishment zones."

"That's right, which proves that I had no real alliance to Daegal."

"I blackmailed you into it, Halah. If you hadn't switched back and helped us, she wouldn't have been released to you. So it doesn't really prove much, does it?" He

flipped a comm switch on the wall. "Torque, I need you down at the subcommand station immediately." He stared at Halah long and hard. The proof was on the screen. She'd said it was someone else but he had a hard time believing that. Who else would it be? "If you weren't responsible, why didn't you alert me about the message when you came across it?"

"I thought it more important to find out what I could quickly, before any data was lost by the system."

He saw her visibly swallow hard. She was scared though trying to hide it. Scared that she'd gotten caught or scared that he wouldn't believe her? That was the question. He didn't want to believe her guilty. "I'll assume that Kam has sensed you're in trouble and is on his way."

"Most likely," she mumbled.

He wanted to question her more before Kam arrived, so he could do so without interference. "If you're not the one in contact with Frost, who is? What did you find out? How did a message even get out from here?"

"I don't know the answer. To any of those questions. You stopped me too soon."

"Why should I believe you, Halah, given your history?"

"Because I'm mated to one of your best friends, Braden. To your own mate's brother. That makes us family."

True. But what did family mean to Halah? He knew she loved Kam and she loved her sister. Still, catching her in the act was hard to ignore. How could he have been so wrong about her?

He wondered what Frost had been told. Was she coming for them now? Planning to destroy them? If Frost knew about the triplets, she'd definitely come for them.

No other reason existed for Halah or anyone else to establish contact with a known enemy except to pass on Xylon secrets, so Frost must have been told. They'd all have to be extra alert and prepared for an attack that was now most likely imminent.

He'd already informed Laszlo of the oxygen problem. Laszlo had sounded confident that it wouldn't cause a problem. He'd said the Initiation wasn't far off. As long as Torque got the decontamination room ready and the ceremony went smoothly, everything would be all right. After the orbiters took off, they could conserve more oxygen by keeping it channeled into the decontamination room for those left behind until rescue arrived. It sounded like a good plan but Braden feared the oxygen leak might be worse than any of them suspected. The sensors hadn't registered anything beyond the original findings but his brain and body told him otherwise.

"Did you tell Frost about my children?" His thoughts raced faster than a comet through space, turning over idea after idea on how best to keep his family safe.

Halah pulled against his belt, her first show of trying to get free. "I didn't tell her anything! Do you really think I'd work for that bitch after she turned me into a sex slave?"

Another good point. Braden heard boots approaching quickly. He turned to see Torque coming up on them. His brother's brow crinkled when he saw Halah tied to the pipes.

"Somehow this looks kinkier than I figure it is. I'm doubting you called me down for a three-way. What's going on?"

"Check the computer."

Torque sat down and stared at the monitor. "What the hell is this?"

"That's what I want to know. I found Halah at the keyboard."

"It wasn't me, Torque. I found the connection already on the system. I was just trying to get the details when Braden came across me."

"Yeah, right."

"If that's what Halah says happened, then that's what happened," a voice behind them said calmly.

They turned to see Kam standing there, not looking happy. With determined steps he strode over to Halah and reached to untie her.

"Hold it right there, Kam," Braden ordered. "Leave her as is."

Kam looked as if he might ignore the order but then his posture relaxed. He laid his hand on her shoulder and spoke softly. "It'll be all right." His gaze switched to Torque and the tone in his voice changed, turning hard. "What did you find on the computer?"

"Nothing. The connection's been broken and the system down here has no auto-log for text communications. It has to be turned on manually to record. That wasn't done as far as I can tell. So we've got no record of the actual transmission, only this one screen shot."

"How was the connection made to begin with?" Braden asked.

"I don't know. There would have to be some sort of direct comm channel already set up between here and Frost. Something separate, which probably only uses pulses or code, otherwise there'd be no reason to tap into the computer for further communication. Once set, with the correct channel and frequency info, the computer could work off the wireless feed to establish a line our system could recognize to send and receive alphanumeric messages."

"But it would have to be a Xylon device," Braden said. "Otherwise, the system would alert us, right?"

"This isn't the Lair. With this equipment, I wouldn't count on the facility sensors picking up a Marid or Sand Moon signature."

"Search me for a comm device," Halah replied. "I don't have one."

Braden looked over at her when she spoke, then turned back to Torque. "Could Halah in any way rig that with her electrical powers and special equipment, even without a dedicated comm device?"

"No way. The circuitry is totally different."

"Let her go, Braden," Kam said. "She didn't do this. Search her."

Braden stepped over to Halah and looked into her eyes. He saw a lot of different emotions directed back at him, including disappointment. Somehow that particular emotion affected him the most. He did a quick body search, already knowing what he'd find. "Nothing."

"It could be small, Braden," Torque said. "You should get Leila to do an internal."

"Like hell," Halah spat. "I've been put through enough. Let me loose."

What a fucking mess, Braden thought. Whoever had a separate and most probably non-Xylon comm device was their traitor. Finding that device would take time they didn't have, for it could be hidden anywhere in the facility. Unless they found it in someone's possession, proving ownership would be nearly impossible.

"Why did I know you'd refuse," Torque answered, a hard look on his face. "You're guilty."

Braden held up his hand for everyone to be quiet. "I'm not going to order an internal search." He looked into Halah's eyes. "But I am going to confine you and Kam to your quarters for now until I get to the bottom of all this."

"Are you kidding?" Halah protested. "Now is not the time to cut us off. You need our help. At least leave Kam free. He didn't do anything."

Braden addressed Kam. "Sorry, Kam. Truthfully, I don't trust that device in your throat. Even though Leila has said it's deactivated. I've seen how it's bothering you. I can tell your headaches are worse too. The pain shows on your face. You're not much use in your current state." When Kam visibly stiffened, Braden softened his voice. "I know you'll set Halah free if you're not in there with her. I can't guard you around the clock. So take the time in confinement to rest. This will all work out."

"Rest." Kam shook his head. "Laszlo will never stand for this, Braden. You know that."

"Exerting your family connections, Kam?" Torque chided. "Convenient threat when needed."

"It wasn't a threat. Just a statement of fact. Now get the fuck off my back!" Kam's glare faded. "We're on the same side here, Braden. I'm getting tired of constantly having to defend myself, as is Halah."

"If we're locked up, who's going to look into the oxygen leak?" she asked, her voice laced with frustration. "We're wasting time with this. I was just about to locate the signature of the external comm device, which might have led us to who the traitor is, when you came up on me, Braden. This could have been over and done with. Torque must have broken the connection when he took over."

Kam's eyes widened. "There's an oxygen leak? How bad?"

"I didn't break any damn connection. I do know what I'm doing."

"So do I." She tugged at her bindings.

"What's going on with the oxygen? Does Laszlo know about this?"

"Enough!" Braden ordered. "Torque, take them to their quarters and lock them in for now. Disengage the communications in the room. I don't want them pleading their case to Laszlo. Be sure to keep Halah's hands secured so she can't zap you."

"You're making a mistake, Braden," Kam said, his eyes narrowing.

Braden took a step toward him. He glanced at Halah, then back at his friend. He kept his voice low and steady. "I need proof, Kam, because right now she's looking damn guilty. I'd rather be wrong about locking you two up than wrong about a traitor. If in my position, I think you'd do the same."

Kam looked about to argue but then his eyes changed. "Perhaps. But since I know the truth, I'm not happy about this."

"Noted."

"What about the oxygen?"

"Laszlo has been informed. We'll handle it."

"And if Laszlo asks where we're at?"

"I'll handle that too."

"There's going to be fallout if you do this. You understand that?"

"There's going to be fallout no matter what I do." He stepped back. "Torque. Can you handle them both?"

"Yeah, I'll secure them together. It won't be a problem once I get them up top. I'll need assistance going up with them though."

Braden nodded. He hated doing this but the evidence didn't look good for Halah. Now they needed someone else to look into the oxygen levels and someone to try to figure out exactly how that transmission was made to Frost, who made it and how long ago it went out. *Damn.*

Chapter Eleven

Brianna stared up at Sam, hardly believing how handsome and sexy he was, with his brown tousled hair and dreamy coco-ale eyes. And it wasn't just his appearance that made him sexy. His self-assurance, intelligence, bravery and the deep caring and commitment to his duty as a military officer were irresistible assets in her eyes. She'd known a lot of compelling men in her life but he was definitely someone special. Someone who stood out above the rest.

With his muscled arms surrounding her so protectively, she felt safe. She felt—*damn*. A disturbing thought suddenly occurred to her. A thought that should have occurred way before now. She squirmed uncomfortably.

"You want up?" he asked.

"Don't you dare move." She didn't want him to ever let her go.

A smile tugged at his lips. "That sounded very close to an order, I think, and I always obey orders."

"Yes." She chuckled. "I'm sure you do."

She didn't know why she hadn't thought to ask about his personal status earlier. Perhaps she'd avoided the issue on purpose, her subconscious blocking it out so she wouldn't have to face the truth if it turned out to be something she'd rather not hear. Or maybe all the stress was just making her forgetful.

Brianna rubbed her temple. She'd developed a touch of a headache. Dull and light, but there. Odd. She never got headaches. Everything was out of whack, including her body.

"What is it?" Sam asked. "Something's bothering you."

She dropped her hand. "Just a little headache."

He studied her closely. "I'm thinking it's a bit more than that. Tell me."

Sam was getting to know her too well. Even her facial expressions. She supposed it was best to settle it in her mind one way or the other by getting everything out into the open. "Well, actually, I never thought to ask you but..."

When she hesitated, a look of concern crossed his face. "What, Brianna?"

Certainly he would have said something. Even Xylon men, with their open attitude about sex, would at least let their partner know. "Do you have a mate or someone special back on Earth?"

The expression on his face changed as he looked down at her and his brow furrowed. "Do you think I'd be here with you, like this, if I did?"

"I don't know. Would you?" He was on an alien planet, with the opportunity to fuck an alien woman. Why wouldn't he? Not that she thought he was with her specifically because she was a female of an alien species, but...

"No, Brianna, I wouldn't. I would never do that. I don't know how things work on Xylon or what's proper behavior, but on Earth, a man with integrity doesn't have sex with another woman if he already has someone special in his life."

"An Earth man without integrity would though?" She'd heard the bond between human mates wasn't as strong as the bond between Xylon mates. She'd been to Earth for brief periods of time and had seen both strong relationships and weak. It amazed her how Earth mates could just part ways and find someone new, almost in the blink of an eye. Once a Xylon female was Branded by her mate, it was for life. She wasn't certain which was the better way. One offered a deeper commitment, the other more freedom of choice.

A slightly sad look crossed his face. "Unfortunately, yes. There are a lot of men, and women for that matter, without integrity, who don't care what they do or who they hurt, as long as they're getting what they want. But I have integrity. I would hope you'd believe that about me."

She didn't hesitate in her response. "I do." She stroked his cheek. The roughness of his unshaven face, with just a touch of dark brown beard, gave him a very roguish look, but she knew Sam wasn't a rogue. He was a man she could trust. A man who did what was right, regardless. "It does makes me feel better, having heard you actually say it though."

Somehow the thought of him with another woman bothered her. More than it should. Socially, on Xylon, sexual freedom was the norm. It had been necessary to create the tight bonds for their survival. But not all Xylons completely embraced the idea.

She'd attended her share of Joining Parties, engaged in public sex, had multiple partners penetrating her at the same time, but now... For some reason, it didn't appeal to her so much anymore. "I admit that I don't completely understand Earth's values and perceptions about sex and their relationships."

"Nor do I, about Xylon. And thus the real world intrudes." He frowned. "Shit."

"We had to get back to reality eventually." She tried to keep her voice light but reality hadn't contained a lot of joy for her lately, so its return was not something she'd been looking forward to. Still, denying the inevitable did neither of them any good.

"Not that."

"No?" Something disturbing had obviously entered his thoughts. "What then?"

"I just gave that grand speech about not fucking around when a special person exists in your life and we're headed into a sexual ceremony, where there's going to be a third person or even more. And I'm going to have to fuck them. Now I feel like an idiot. My brain must be in park."

"An Initiation is different. It's a duty." His words caused her pulse to race. Did that mean he thought she was the special person in his life and he didn't want to be with anyone else? Moisture built behind her eyes but she refused to show that vulnerable side of herself and forced the tears away.

Sam looked at her with uncertainty on his face before speaking again. "Yes. I guess. It's all kind of difficult to wrap my mind around."

"I understand. Cultural differences are oftentimes the most difficult."

"Well, I've learned over the years that sometimes you have to take a leap of faith and let whatever happens, happen, no matter the struggles that may come."

She cocked her head at him, thinking that an odd statement, especially from a highly trained military man. She didn't think he quite grasped the rite's concept. An Initiation was about survival. "I don't think —"

"Let's not think too much, Brianna. Sometimes it's better not to understand everything completely but to just feel your way." He pulled her on top of his cock, which had grown rock hard again.

Ah yes. Feelings. She was all for that. The feel of him inside her stole any logical thought from her brain. With a contented sigh, she sank down all the way until his cock filled her pussy completely. With him inside her — touching her, fucking her, giving her more pleasure than any she's ever known — everything felt right.

His fingers curled around her hips. "Brianna?" he whispered softly.

She looked down into his eyes. His voice had come out quietly but she could see that whatever he wanted to say was extremely important. She waited, giving him however much time he needed, though her sexual needs felt as if they were stealing all coherent thought from her. The muscles of her pussy lightly squeezed his cock.

He closed his eyes a moment, as if fighting for control too. When he opened his eyes again and spoke, his expression and tone were completely serious. "Only us. No matter what. Here." He tapped his chest. "In our hearts. Only us. Yes?"

At his words, her pulse raced, the blood rushing through her body like a space-speeder. "Yes. Only us."

As long as they remained in this room, their worlds didn't exist. Their problems didn't exist. Their responsibilities didn't exist. Only the two of them existed and the pleasure they were able to give each other.

She began to ride his cock, slowly and steadily. Her eyes remained locked with his. She felt her body reacting, her sexual need building even more. Her palms rested on his chest and her fingers curled into the hair there. So soft. Before Sam, only duty and fun had existed for her. Now...

The emotions in his eyes humbled her and made her crave more from him than was realistic. He pumped his cock up into her. Not hard, not gently, but with a confidence she admired. As if she truly belonged to him in his heart. As he'd said. As if those hadn't just been words to calm her.

Sam would make a good Warrior.

But Sam wasn't a Warrior, did not have any Xylon blood in him at all. She tried to force away the sudden negative thoughts but they crashed through her in wave after emotional wave. She and Sam could never officially be joined. He could never Brand her as his woman, his mate. They could never know that special connection.

"Hey," he said, his voice gentle as he stilled his hips. "Where did I lose you?"

His words brought her back. She shook her head. "I'm sorry." She had to make the most of their time together now because it was, in all likelihood, the last bit of private time they'd have. Again she felt the sting of moisture behind her eyes. What was wrong with her? She bounced up and down on his cock, needing to drive him as deeply inside her as she could.

He grabbed her hips. "Whoa. Wait. What's going on, Brianna?"

"Nothing. Now fuck me!" She didn't know why but all of a sudden she felt lonelier than she ever had in her life. She didn't want to feel that. All she wanted was to join with Sam, to feel the ecstasy only he could give her. To fuck him until no other thoughts entered her mind.

He pulled her off him and she moaned in distress. No man stopped a woman in mid-fuck. Why did he have to be so understanding, when she just wanted to purge these feelings inside her? She tried to scoot off the bed but he dragged her back against his chest and held her tightly.

"Relax. Relax." He stroked her skin and hair soothingly. "Something's wrong. What is it?"

She shook her head. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't even understand it. All this wasn't supposed to be so serious, so important. But somehow that's exactly what it had become.

"Okay. You don't have to tell me." He kissed her gently behind the ear. "But I'm here when you're ready to talk." His words faded as he said them.

He probably realized, as she did, that their time was coming to an end and he might not be here with her in this shelter for much longer. They didn't know what was going to happen once the Initiation was complete and the orbiters were ready to go. He would be headed back to Earth and she'd most likely either remain here until a rescue ship could be sent or she'd be one of the first to head off for the Ice Moon to assume a command position. Others down here had much more Earth experience. They would be chosen for the long-range mission. She held little hope of being able to join him.

"Don't be sad, Brianna."

His voice held such feeling, as if he knew exactly where her thoughts had gone. She sniffled but refused to cry.

Tentatively he lifted her leg and draped it back over his own. He slowly entered her from behind, pushing into her cunt all the way. She sighed and her muscles clenched

his thick shaft. She needed him so badly. His cock inside her made her feel complete. Physically and emotionally.

No. She mentally shook herself. This was all physical. It couldn't be anything more than that. If she admitted it was, she'd have to endure another loss when circumstances ultimately tore them apart. She was a Warrior, in control of her emotions, in control of her body, enjoying sex just for sex.

Sam cupped her breast, then moved his fingers to gently play with her nipple. He pumped his hips, fucking her slowly, building the physical pleasure to a point where nothing else mattered. She reached for his hand, pulling it from her body, and laced her fingers through his. This leisurely fucking brought all her tender emotions to a peak and she felt on the edge of breaking down, no matter how hard she was trying to control it.

He kissed the back of her ear, then let his tongue swirl around the rim. He nibbled on her lobe. "Come for me."

A climax rushed through her, strong and unexpected. "Ah..." She moaned and arched, feeling him coming inside her at the same time. They both groaned in ecstasy then sagged against the mattress, still joined.

"You make me a better man," he whispered in her ear.

"Oh, Sam." That had done it. She couldn't fight what she knew in her heart. She was falling in love with Colonel Samuel Briggs. She'd known the truth, admitted it to herself without using the actual word, then tried to deny it. All because these feelings scared her to death. She was beyond denying it now. With a touch of his hand, with each soft word, whenever they stared deeply into each other's eyes, her heart melted.

Let whatever happens, happen. His words echoed in her head. Somehow, everything was going to turn out all right. It had to. Or she might not survive.

* * * * *

Halah watched Kam punch the door with his fist. Torque had locked them in their quarters as Braden had ordered. She understood her mate's anger and frustration.

This was ridiculous. Too much needed to be done for them to be locked away. With no way to communicate either, other than some silly little beeper, in case an emergency with Kam's health or some other such problem arose.

Torque had pulled the wires from the communication's panel and taken them with him. He'd said he would check on them later and bring them some food but that would probably be very much later, given the tasks at hand. "Is there any way you can connect with Laszlo mentally?"

"I'm a Sensor Reader, not a psychic, Halah," Kam snapped. "As Torque so aptly pointed out back in the meeting," he muttered.

"I know that. Don't take your foul mood out on me. I'm just trying to help." She paced back and forth, then turned toward the door in thought.

Kam puffed out a breath. "Sorry. My head and throat hurt. Not that I should use that as an excuse. Please. Forgive me."

Halalah's gaze shifted to his face, where she saw his genuine pain and regret. Worry snaked through her. She didn't see how he survived, day after day, having to live with such discomfort. "Didn't Leila give you something?"

"It's worn off. I think the drugs down here are probably too old for any truly effective treatment."

"What about those pills from Frost? Do you have any of those?" She'd begged him not to take any of the medication he'd received during their mission on the Sand Moon, not knowing what they might contain. But if that's all they had –

"Unfortunately, no."

She stepped over to him and rubbed his temple, sending a small electrical charge through his head. Usually it helped. She regretted her harsh words to him. They were under a lot of stress and she knew he hadn't meant any harm. "Is there an access panel to the door on the inside somewhere?"

"I don't know. Why?"

She wiggled her fingers. "Maybe I can short out the controls and get us out of here. We can go directly to Laszlo after that."

Kam's brow furrowed.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know if I want to do that."

Now he was making no sense. "What do you mean? You want to get out of here, don't you?"

"Yes of course I do. How bad is that oxygen problem?"

"Bad enough. Don't change the subject. What's going on inside your head?" She was worried about him. He'd been acting differently since the implant had been deactivated. Not a lot but enough for her to notice him struggling more with everything, as if he didn't have complete control over himself.

Like Braden, she didn't trust the device Frost had put inside Kam's throat. She suspected there was more to the sonic controller than any of them realized.

"If we break out and go to Laszlo, it will look like we're taking sides against Braden," Kam explained. "Braden and the others will never trust us again."

"They don't trust us now. We've already proven ourselves, more than once. It still wasn't enough. It might never be enough for them."

"That's just because of the shit with Laszlo, the layer of secrets never ends. He keeps putting me into a position where I can't win. And you too, by association, if nothing else."

"Which the others should understand isn't our fault. Are we supposed to spend the rest of our lives begging them to believe and trust us?"

"They're my friends and my family. They feel betrayed. Maybe in their position I'd feel the same." He shrugged, his emotional discomfort as visible on his face as his physical discomfort. "I don't know. My thinking is scattered."

"It's the oxygen...and probably the pain." She thought over what he'd said. The others felt betrayed, yes, but so did he. That was obvious and she understood why. Regardless, none of that changed their situation. "Our primary concern should be getting out of this shelter safely. We need to be working together right now. Someone down here is a traitor. It's not either one of us. Laszlo will believe us. You know that."

"And if the traitor is Laszlo himself? We could be playing right into his hands."

"Do you believe he is?" She wasn't used to hearing Kam doubt Laszlo's motives, just his methods.

"I don't know what to believe anymore."

"All right." She sighed. "If you don't want to go to Laszlo, let's try to verify who's sabotaging everything ourselves. We can sneak into Laszlo's quarters while he's involved with the Initiation. He has a computer we can use and no one will be the wiser. I might be able to pull up some ghost files from the substation's temp storage. I can access it through the network. As long as they didn't shut down the computer, which would wipe it clean, some evidence might still be hidden in the system. With this ancient equipment, it's a guess at best. But it's at least worth a shot."

Kam nodded. "I like that idea. I want this settled." His eyes suddenly lit up. "What about the vids? We can check who used that computer since we've been in the shelter."

"There aren't any vid-monitors on the sublevel. Only up here in the public areas."

His brow furrowed. "Which means, if we're able to get out of here, our escape will be recorded once we hit the corridors. I hadn't thought about that."

"I'm sure no one is monitoring the videos right now. They're too busy for that. We'll be all right until someone comes with food, which will be a while. If they even bother at all."

"Halah..."

"Sorry, I'm jaded. Now, what about that access panel?"

He turned and examined the walls. "There's no clear access, but if we can break through the wall on the right here, we should be able to get into the circuitry."

* * * * *

The comm in Laszlo's quarters buzzed. Brianna slipped out of bed. Sam had fallen asleep a while ago after making love to her more tenderly than any man ever had. He'd made her come so many times that she'd lost count. A very special memory she intended to keep tucked away deep in her heart.

After they'd fucked, she'd slept too, better than she had in a long while. But once she awoke, reality set in again. She'd felt the call coming. No matter how much she didn't want to think about it, they had their duties. She knew what that buzz meant.

As she reached the comm panel, her gaze turned back to the man in bed, lying completely naked atop the covers. His light snores made her smile. Odd as it sounded, the normalcy of a man's snore relaxed her. She flipped a switch on the comm panel. "Brianna here."

"It's Laszlo. We're ready for you and Colonel Briggs in the conference room."

"All right. We're on our way." This was it. She hesitated a moment, not wanting to give up the peace she'd found here. Finally she headed back over to the bed and crawled up onto the mattress. "Sam. Wake up," she whispered.

He slowly stirred. "Hmm."

"Laszlo is ready for us. It's time for the Initiation."

His eyes slowly opened and he stretched. "I'm not looking forward to leaving this room, this bed." With a contented look on his face, he yawned.

She smiled back at him. "Me either. It's much more comfortable than those mats we've been sleeping on."

"Especially comfortable with you next to me." He reached for her.

Brianna pushed away reluctantly. "We need to get cleaned up and dressed." She eased off the bed.

Sam frowned. "Spoilsport."

Once they'd both used the EPS—a waterless, electronic power shower—they returned to the sleeping area. As Brianna started to dress, her mind drifted to military matters. "Um, Sam?"

"Yeah?" He bent over to grab his underwear off the floor.

"If ACE is an alien exchange program, who did we exchange for you?"

He paused in pulling on his boxers and looked up, surprise reflected on his face. After a moment, he slipped on the underwear. He looked away and picked up his one-piece uniform. "Shouldn't that be something you ask Laszlo?" He stepped into the legs and pushed his arms through the sleeves.

"I'm asking you."

"You better ask him." He zipped the front, then reached for his boots.

Brianna huffed out a frustrated breath of air. Just when she thought she had Sam figured out, he went and did something aggravatingly male.

She understood duty and following orders, but considering the circumstances, she would have thought he'd be more open and honest with her. She was a command officer after all.

But then, he didn't really understand the dynamics of the group here. And there certainly wasn't time to try to explain everything to him. It was all too involved and complicated.

Sam looked back over at her and stared into her eyes. "Some things I can't relate, Brianna. I'm sure there are things you can't tell me either."

He had a point there. "You're right." She didn't want to put him in an awkward position for she'd expect the same respect from him if their positions were reversed. "I don't like it. But I won't push you about it."

"I appreciate that." He stepped up to her. "Believe me when I say I wouldn't hold back anything I thought would hurt you."

"Now you sound like Laszlo."

He frowned. "Somehow I don't think that's a compliment."

She smiled and scratched her temple. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"All right. Maybe I did. A little. My frustration got the better of me. One of my faults. But I truly am sorry." She stroked his cheek and sighed. "We all have things we feel we can and cannot do, people we can and cannot trust, information we can and cannot share. It's definitely difficult."

"Military life." He reached up and covered her hand with his. "You can trust me, Brianna. You have no reason to do so and I have no way to convince you that you can, other than my words."

"I know."

Again he frowned. Obviously her short response hadn't been what he'd expected. But it was all she could give him for now. "We need to go."

As she headed toward the door, he grabbed her hand and pulled her back. "Hey, if it comes down to it, I will side with you. I won't betray you, Brianna. I'll never turn my back on you."

Her heart pounded. He'd just declared his loyalty to her. Even over Laszlo. "Why?" she asked in a low voice, her legs feeling shaky.

"Sometimes a man has to go with his gut. My gut is telling me it's the right thing to do. As well as my heart," he added in a low voice, a small smile tugging at his lips.

She smiled back. But what of his other alliance? "And if it came down to Xylon or Earth?"

He stood in silence, looking at her for what felt like an eternity. He shook his head. "Don't ask that of me, Brianna. Any more than you'd want me to ask you the same question."

An honest answer. Her respect for him rose yet another notch. She nodded. "Fair enough." Her fingers tightened around his. She felt as if they were truly a team. A team with a shaky future, for certain, but they'd face that future together. "Let's go."

* * * * *

Underground

Tara paced. She stumbled on the uneven ground but caught herself before falling. "Damn it." Then she paced some more, trying to figure everything out.

Her vision was still blurry, thus her unsteadiness. Her hands were still bandaged, which made her feel practically useless. She was still in pain, which irritated her and sapped her energy.

But...she was alive.

She saw enough from time to time to have seen the scars on her arms and legs. She didn't know what had happened to her uniform but she was now dressed in some sort of animal skin or something. Not as disgusting as she would have thought. The hide felt super soft against her body.

Her voice had returned for the most part. About the same time that she'd begun speaking clearly again, the two men who had been helping her, fucking her, got into some sort of argument and she hadn't seen either man since.

She hadn't actually heard them arguing. Instead they'd used hand gestures, as Class 1 and Class 2 Xylon Warriors often did when they didn't want outsiders to know what they were saying. The movements hadn't really been distinguishable to her but the emotions had been unmistakable.

Now some strange, unfriendly woman came to help her with food and bathing.

Since they kept her isolated, she'd had no interaction with any part of their society. If they even had an organized society. Because of that, everything had been extra difficult to figure out, especially with her brain being scrambled. Somehow she thought she ought to be able to reason this out. If her eyes could only focus better, it would probably be a lot easier to sort things in her head. Visual clues were often the most useful.

She didn't understand why the men had abandoned her, especially the one she'd begun to feel a kinship with. The one who had always been so kind to her. She missed his strong presence, for he'd made her feel safe.

Since they hadn't been attending her, the pain in her limbs, her face, her whole body had increased. The increased discomfort hadn't helped her thought processes any.

So much of her memory was spotty. She'd remember something, then it would be gone. Frustrating! She must have taken a wicked blow to the head.

Eventually she figured she'd get better and everything would come together in her mind. She just needed to remain calm and stay patient. Unfortunately, patience wasn't her best asset.

Her eyesight had improved enough that she suspected she was in some sort of cave system. If so, she was probably underground on one of Xylon's moons.

One of the outer moons. For the Sand Moon's soil had a different feel under her feet. It was too warm here, even if deep underground, to be the Ice Moon. She knew this couldn't be Marid. Their underground cave system consisted only of mining colonies as

far as she knew. This area seemed almost completely undeveloped and she didn't hear any machinery in use nearby.

Once she got better, she was out of here. After she got up top, she'd know for certain where she was and what actions she needed to take to get back to her family, if they still lived.

Torque, Brianna, Braden... If only they could hear her.

* * * * *

Planet Xylon
Auxiliary Underground Shelter

Tara... Torque swallowed hard, forcing back a sudden flood of emotion. He shook his head. He was having a hard time concentrating. The lower oxygen levels were affecting him more than they should. He was actually thinking crazy thoughts. Thoughts that did him no good. He had to switch his focus before he lost his mind.

Braden had come up to the control room to retrieve some special tools and equipment for the orbiter rewire. He'd been on his way back out when he stopped beside the main computer station.

Torque felt his brother staring at him and it angered him. He didn't know why. He just knew that he was mad at the universe right now and Braden was in close range. Too close. "Why are you staring?" he bit out.

"Are you all right?"

"Fuck no."

Now was not the time for this but it just came out. He'd thought he'd put Tara and her loss into a safe place, way in the depths of his heart. But he hadn't and he didn't know if he'd ever be able to do so. Somehow, he just didn't feel that she was truly gone.

But she was. His twin was dead.

Sure she had been Braden's sister too and he knew his brother and Brianna were mourning as well. But his entire heart had been ripped out. Funny, since he'd never realized he actually had a heart or could care so much.

He hoped that Tara had known how much he'd loved her. That would at least be some comfort. He should have shown her more often. Now, he'd never get the chance.

"From the look on your face, it's obvious where your mind is, Torque. I've seen the same pain on my own face when I look in a reflector. And on Brianna's face." Braden touched his shoulder. "You couldn't have done anything differently. What happened had nothing to do with you. It was just...circumstances."

"Yeah." Words didn't help him feel any better. He should have been able to protect Tara. He'd never forgive himself for not getting her out of the Lair before the bomb hit. Now he just wanted to sleep. To escape. To be with his mystery dream woman, which

was the only time the pain went away. He didn't know who she was or why she kept appearing in his dreams at night and even in his daydreams but he craved her presence, for she gave him a distraction. Limitless sex. And peace.

"Is everything entered into the system now?" Braden asked, switching subjects.

"No."

"You know we've got a time issue?" his brother asked, though he kept his voice soft.

Torque looked over at him. "Yeah, Braden, I know." He turned back to stare hard at the computer screen. "I'll get it done. Just leave me the fuck alone!" He punched a few buttons until a page of code loaded.

Normally that would be enough to send anyone running. Torque was used to others backing down from him whenever he growled. Braden had always been the exception, which was damn frustrating...and strangely comforting.

"You better pull yourself out of this depression you're in and get your mind on the work, brother. I know how you're feeling, but —"

Torque surged out of his chair, sending it rolling backward across the room to crash into the wall. "You don't know shit, Braden! Don't ever try to pretend that you do!"

Braden didn't give an inch. "Tara was my sister too. I loved her." His voice cracked. "I know you two had a special connection. Just as Brianna and I do. So believe me. I do understand."

They stood glaring at each other for long, tense moments.

Finally, Braden stepped back and shook his head. "This oxygen situation, along with a possible traitor in our midst, is affecting us. We shouldn't be going at each other."

Torque stepped back too, the only concession he was willing to give right now. Venting his anger on Braden wouldn't change things, though it had helped him to defuse. He took in a calming breath and released it slowly. They needed to get back to the situation at hand. Braden had been right about that. "What are we going to do about proving who the traitor is?"

"I'll have Pitch take Alexa and the triplets to medical. He can use the computer there to look into any messages sent to Frost, just in case some evidence is hidden in the system somewhere. He'll still be readily available to protect Alexa that way. And medical is closest to the decontamination room if Frost shows up and we have to move everyone in there fast. We can secure ourselves in the room if need be, redirect the oxygen, and Frost or whoever she sends will be history."

"I'd never let another man look after my mate. You should stay with Alexa yourself and let Pitch work on the orbiter."

"If I could, I would. The coding is too technical. He doesn't have the background to do the bypass. Erik is the only other one I trust to do it properly and I've got him working on a special project."

When Braden didn't explain further, Torque frowned. He'd overheard Braden speaking to Erik, even though their voices had been hushed. He knew what they were doing. He wondered if his brother realized that, so saw no reason to elaborate, or if he just didn't want to confide in him. The last thought bothered him but he wouldn't push the issue. For now. "What are we going to do about saving the oxygen we have left? The more we can conserve, the longer we'll have, especially if we continue to run into problems."

"Erik and I will get on it after we finish what we're working on. I really don't think we're going to be able to find the leak. The ventilation system setup down here is a mess of mazes. We'll try but I'm afraid we're probably going to have to deal with what we have and hope there's time to get everything done before the air dips to a deadly level." Braden clapped his shoulder. "I'm going to get back to work."

"Wait, um, we may have another problem."

"Another problem?" Braden's eyes narrowed.

"I'm still checking into it. I didn't want to say anything until I knew one way or the other. But you might as well be alerted." It seemed as if the fates were working against them. Everything was going wrong.

"What's happened now?"

"It looks like we're losing power. Gradual, but there."

Braden scrubbed a hand down his face. "How gradual?"

"It's gone down to ninety-seven percent since we've been here. That's not much but there shouldn't be more than a one perfect fluctuation at any time. I find it interesting that the power didn't start draining until just recently. The regenerator equipment seems to be glitching. But only now and then."

"Can it be fixed?"

"Unknown. I can't pinpoint the problem through the system. There's no regenerator-specific diagnostic to run for this. Besides, the drop has been so small, I'm still not completely sure there even is a real problem or if this is just a minor complication due to the age of the equipment or how it was originally configured."

"How much power do we need to stay functional?"

"With what we're using now, given our numbers and the projects we're working on, we need eighty percent at least or we'll really start having problems with the equipment. Closer to ninety would be better. I've already shut down all unnecessary systems, just in case."

"Good."

"Once the orbiters are gone, we can shut down a lot more systems and function as low as sixty-five percent if necessary, as long as everyone is in the decontamination room."

Braden nodded. "Continue working on the room. Once you finish with that, if there's time and the levels have dropped again, look into the regenerator problem more closely. Start with the main circuitry system and work out from there."

"I have the computers calculating how long it will be before the power drops below eighty percent. And also sixty-five percent. I don't know how accurate the results will be though, since the glitch seems to come and go. The computer might not be able to do the calculations. I've also still got the computer working on the oxygen levels, calculating how much time we have, given the progression of the air loss, before we get into real trouble."

"Why is it taking so long to calculate?"

"Everything down here operates slower than a slug-dragger. The main operating system is outdated and isn't handling the load very well. If things get too bad, we'll need to start shutting off areas of the shelter to conserve the air and the power. I'd have done that already but we need access to too much of the equipment right now."

Braden nodded. "If the computer comes up with anything reasonable sounding, let me know and we'll go over the results and decide what to do. I need to go speak with Pitch and Alexa, get them off to medical, then I'll be heading back down to the orbiters."

Chapter Twelve

Hand in hand, Briggs and Brianna arrived at the conference room. At their approach, the doors slid open. *No going back now*, Briggs thought. Not that he had intended to disobey military orders and withdraw his participation. But being here again, in the room where they intended to hold the Initiation, lent an inevitability to the situation.

As soon as he and Brianna stepped within the entry, they both stopped abruptly.

"Oh!" Brianna looked around, a sound of awe on her voice.

Sam's heart rate kicked up a notch. "Wow." The whole area looked redone. He glanced back toward the corridor, making certain this was the right room. "Did we take a wrong turn?"

"I was wondering the same thing for a second."

While they stood there like sightseers at a resort, the doors tried to slide closed behind them but hit Brianna in the butt and bounced against her. "Damn it!" she yelped.

Sam chuckled and automatically reached his arm around her waist in a steadying and protective gesture. "What? You don't enjoy a little smack on the ass?" he whispered in her ear. He'd barely missed getting caught himself.

She punched a button on the wall, which caused the doors to fully reopen and apparently locked them in the open position. "Only if you would do it."

His heart skipped a beat. "I'll remind you of that later."

She smiled sexily at him. "I look forward to it." She leaned into his side. "Isn't this incredible?"

His attention returned to the room. "Definitely."

The lighting in particular, subdued and romantic, had transformed the atmosphere of the once sterile-looking room into something very easy on the eyes. The floor was covered with colored blankets and sheets and mats and pillows. Probably three times the amount they had before, when they'd first set things up in here. Colored sheets even hung from the ceiling.

The room looked almost like a harem. No longer did he see any medical equipment or tables, which were now probably obscured by the hanging blue and pale yellow drapery.

He couldn't imagine where everything had come from. Probably medical. He knew of a supply area in there toward the rear of the room. He remembered seeing it on one of his nightly explorations. He'd never gotten the opportunity to look inside though.

"I feel a woman's touch in the room," Brianna said. "Leila must have redecorated for us."

"I can certainly live with this." A delicate scent of something that he couldn't identify but enjoyed even wafted through the air.

They stepped farther into the room to look around more closely. The mirror along one wall made the area look twice as big and actually played well with one's senses, giving the room a fantasy-like look and feel. Leila, if she were indeed the one responsible, had known what she was doing.

Sam suddenly wondered if Leila might help initiate him. She was Erik's mate, a possessive man, if he'd read the Warrior correctly. Leila was a doctor, or rather Healer, as they were called on Xylon. A logical choice. She was certainly beautiful. Not anything like Brianna, of course, but a woman who could definitely turn a man's head.

Speaking of whom... From the corner of his eye, Sam noticed Leila step inside the room and he turned in her direction. Laszlo followed close behind. The two came over to him and Brianna.

"I hope you approve," Leila said with a smile.

At the sound of her voice, Brianna turned. "Oh yes. It's beautiful, Leila. Thank you for doing all this."

"Colonel Briggs?" she asked.

"It's very nice. Your attention to detail is appreciated."

He had to respect Laszlo and Leila for their consideration. This Initiation was a military duty. The Xylons could have simply performed it in the medical lab, or in this room as it originally was, and left it at that.

"We will need three for the Initiation," Leila said, blurting the words awkwardly and changing the relaxed mood in the room to something more intense. An uncomfortable expression crossed her face and she twisted her fingers. "So, um, Brianna will lead as planned. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Brianna answered.

Sam nodded, wondering at Leila's discomfort. Perhaps she actually had been chosen to be involved in the rite but didn't want to be. He certainly didn't want to have sex with any woman who felt forced into it.

Or maybe she simply wondered if he wanted her to be one of the three involved. Or wondered how her mate would react. Or wondered how Brianna would react. They hadn't exactly kept their growing relationship a secret. Or maybe her discomfort stemmed from something different entirely.

A woman's thoughts were usually a puzzle to him. Xylon women weren't any different in that respect, he'd quickly learned. He expected her to say something further that might reveal her feelings about the situation but Laszlo spoke instead.

"We do have a problem."

"What's that?" Sam asked, his attention switching immediately to the man. He felt a surge of tension in the room. If Leila *and* Laszlo looked uncomfortable, something serious was definitely up.

"All the women here are Branded and you're not a Warrior," he said.

Brianna groaned. "Oh goodness. That's right."

"Meaning what?" Sam asked.

He'd noticed the marks on the back of each mated woman's neck and Brianna had explained the significance of a Brand in general but hadn't gone into detail. For an advanced civilization, he'd thought the concept of branding women more than a bit archaic, though he hadn't expressed that feeling aloud.

"A Branded woman cannot engage in sex with a non-Warrior," Laszlo explained. "The Brand, in part, was originally intended to protect our females from the Egesa, but in theory, any sexual contact by an alien will trigger a release of poison into your system as long as you have sweat glands. Without the ability to self-heal at a rapid rate, the poison could be deadly. Definitely deadly for the Egesa, regardless. Even a Xylon male who is not a Warrior would be at risk, depending on his chemical makeup and levels of protection."

"I don't have the necessary equipment down here to test if you'll be susceptible to the poison," Leila added. "It would be too dangerous to take the chance."

Brianna let out a heavy breath and her eyes held a tentative look. "So, I guess that means —"

"Yes," Laszlo answered before she finished. "Not generally a problem for most Xylons but possibly a problem for the Colonel."

"Excuse me," Sam interrupted, wondering why they believed their Branded women were an issue when another option existed. "What about the other female? The unmated one? Josella."

Laszlo shook his head. "She has no Xylon blood. We have no way of knowing how these altered chemicals will affect her."

"Wait. You said the tests on females were simple to conduct to find out if they'd have complications or not," Brianna offered.

"On full-blooded human females," Laszlo responded. "And that was with the regular Initiation chemicals. These are different. They will react differently from what we're used to in the systems of all involved. A full-blooded Xylon won't consciously notice the differences. Josella could be affected severely. Even after Briggs goes through the rite, the protections and breeding preparations for him won't be exactly the same as a Xylon Warrior because of the differences in the chemicals. But from the preliminary tests we've run, it should be sufficient for what we need."

"We can try testing Josella," Leila offered. "We do have the equipment to examine those results. I just don't have what I need to test poisons. Since Josella doesn't have mixed blood, the results shouldn't take that long to ascertain. We might get lucky."

After a tense moment in silent thought, Laszlo's furrowed brow eased. "Fine." He waved in a dismissive manner. "If you want to do the tests, see to it quickly while I finalize the other details. But if it takes too long or if the results are inconclusive, we'll have to use an alternate. We do have a time factor to consider."

As Leila rushed from the room, Laszlo paced, a look of concentration marring his face. Finally he came to a stop in front of them. "Even if Josella can attend, we still need a third."

"Initiations have been done many times with two." Confidence laced Brianna's voice. "We can proceed the same."

"With so many unknowns, it would be risky. We need a backup to make certain we're covered. Or in case this doesn't work with Josella. At least one, preferably two of the male Warriors will need to volunteer."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Briggs took a step backward. "The men? I do not swing that way. At all."

"Swing?" Brianna questioned.

"It's an Earth term, I believe," Laszlo explained. "They are very repressed sexually, for the most part, especially the males."

"Hey, I'm not repressed. I will fuck any woman you choose. Any way you choose."

Brianna cocked an eyebrow at him.

He cleared his throat and did his best to avoid her suddenly pointed stare. He needed to stay focused. "I don't fuck men and no man is fucking me."

"Any male Warrior would only engage in an emergency."

"It's not happening." He glared at Laszlo for what felt like an eternity. Laszlo returned the glare full force. When it became apparent neither of them was going to back down, Briggs knew this was an issue best solved in private—man to man. "Brianna, could you give Laszlo and me a moment alone?" he asked, finally meeting her gaze. He couldn't imagine her thoughts right now.

A surprised look crossed her face at his request but then she simply said, "Of course." She looked to Laszlo and when he nodded, she left the room.

Briggs waited until he felt assured no one was around, then he turned toward Laszlo. "I'm not taking some Warrior's dick up the ass. I don't care what I agreed to or what my duty is."

The fierce look on Laszlo's face slowly faded and he actually chuckled. "You Earth people do amuse me. You will not be forced to do that. There are other ways."

"I'm not interested in any way with a male Warrior."

"If Josella agrees and is physically able to handle the chemicals, the ladies should be able to satisfy you sufficiently. The male Warrior, if only one is needed, will be here to help out mostly with the needs of the women, so do not stress so much."

Should? Mostly? Sam didn't like the sound of those words. He didn't like the sound of the whole thing. In more ways than one.

There was no way he would stand by and watch another man fuck his woman.

He paused in his thoughts. *His woman?* Well, hell. He supposed that's exactly how he had come to think of Brianna, whether he had the right or not. This was going to get very complicated, very quickly. But there was no point in denying his feelings any longer. Not to himself anyway.

Worry hung over him like the threat of a pending storm. He tried to stay calm and think all this through. Could he basically sacrifice his soul if he had to, if none of the women besides Brianna could participate in the rite?

If some male tried to touch him sexually, he knew he'd punch the guy in the face. He wouldn't be able to stop himself.

"You will need to take a dildo up the ass—to use your words," Laszlo continued. "Brianna can do it. It is the only way to protect you internally so it must remain part of the rite."

"I'm not happy about that either." Though, if given a choice, he'd rather take the dildo than a cock. He remembered Brianna wanting to use a dildo on him in the Lair. She'd never gotten the chance.

"Get over it, Colonel. This Initiation will be a transitional rite to create what we will need for the rest of your military. We have to follow certain steps for this to work."

Sam pulled at the neck of his uniform. The air seemed thin to him. Must be the tension. Or maybe the strange scent was affecting him. "And what if this doesn't work?"

Laszlo's eyes burned into his. "Life as you know it on Earth will be destroyed. Forever."

* * * * *

On his way back down to the sublevel from one of the relief rooms, Braden ran into Erik. "Hey, what's up?"

"I'm done with the transport-connector and the vid-comm."

"Already?" Before he'd returned to working on the orbiters, he'd filled Erik in on what had happened with Halah and Kam and also about the possible power drain. He hadn't asked about the progress of the transport-connector at the time, thinking the programming would take a lot longer.

"It wasn't that difficult once I got going, since the TC was already set up for multiple transport. That part only had to be tweaked a bit. The computer had the coordinates I needed for the settings. And programming a pulse relay was pretty easy." He handed Braden the vid-comm. "Do you want me to explain to Alexa the plan and how to use the device?"

"We'll both do that. Since you're done with this project now, after we speak with Alexa, I'm going to head to medical and check the computer network's security files for evidence of the traitor. You and Pitch can continue securing the ships and finish the

programming. You know the coding as well as I do." After thinking over Torque's words and now finding that Erik had finished with the transport-connector and the vid-comm, he'd decided the change was a good idea.

"Pitch is much better at figuring out security files than any of us."

"Yeah, but I'd feel better if I were the one protecting Alexa and the babies. I don't want to do that down on the sublevel. I don't want them near the ships while they're being worked on. Just in case there's another overload. It's too dangerous. I can't let anything happen to my family, Erik. Now that I know Frost could show up, I want to be with them as much as possible."

Erik nodded. "I understand. I'll take care of the orbiters and make certain everything is set."

"Thanks." Braden appreciated Erik's understanding and cooperation, without him having to make it an official order. "We can let Pitch know what's going on after we talk to Alexa about the transport-connector. Then we'll get her and the babies moved to medical."

They headed down the corridor. Braden's thoughts raced. If everything didn't work perfectly, they could all be in real trouble. It scared him shitless, though he'd never admit that aloud. Erik must have sensed his stress, for he didn't say anything more, only kept in step beside him.

Erik had always been a good friend. He and Erik and Kam used to be practically inseparable. They'd gone on too many missions together to count. They'd raised a lot of hell, fucked a lot of women and achieved great military success.

Bygone days.

Within moments he and Erik reached his and Alexa's quarters. He punched the button and the door slid open. Pitch stood with his weapon in hand. He lowered the disruptor when he saw who stood in the corridor.

"Where's Alexa?" Braden asked him, stepping inside.

"She's in the back with the babies."

"Hang outside the door. Erik and I want to talk to you but we need some privacy with Alexa for a few minutes." He didn't want to announce to Pitch, or any of the others really, that they'd come up with an emergency exit plan for his mate and children but not for anyone else.

Pitch nodded and stepped into the corridor.

Braden motioned for Erik to follow him into the back. "Alexa, it's Erik and me. Are you decent?"

Alexa turned toward them as they approached. She planted her hands on her hips. "You're supposed to ask that before you come in."

"Ah. Yes, dear." He'd seen her image in one of the reflectors before entering the room but he loved to tease her.

Erik chuckled.

Braden kissed Alexa on the cheek, then immediately went to hover over his children, who were lying on the bed, wide awake and looking around. He touched each one tenderly on the cheek and swore the girls smiled at him, even though Alexa had told him they were too young for that.

Erik came up beside him and grinned down at the triplets. "When are you two going to name these little ones?"

Alexa smiled. "We have some names in mind but we're waiting for the right time to tell everyone." Her expression turned serious. "Now, what are you guys doing here? Somehow it doesn't feel like a social call."

The two straightened up. Braden cleared his throat. "We want to talk to you about getting out of this shelter."

"Okay."

"Lots of things could go wrong, Alexa. We want you and the babies to have the best possible chance of surviving. So we've come up with an emergency plan."

"Emergency plan?" She shook her head. "I thought we were pretty much out of options except what's currently in motion."

"Not quite." Erik took out the transport-connector. "We have this."

Her brow furrowed. "A transport-connector? You said those were useless."

"Yes," Braden answered. "We can't use it to dematerialize up to a ship without being in contact with the vessel to make certain it maintains coordinates. But there's a relatively safe and stable location, near enough, that you and the babies can dematerialize to in an emergency."

"Where?"

"It's an old repair station that's orbiting Xylon," Erik answered. "It's abandoned, so nothing and nobody's there. But it has an atmosphere and temperature regulation. It will be a safe haven until someone can rescue you."

Braden pulled out his vid-comm. "If you use the transport-connector, I'll receive notification through the VC. In case our internal connections go screwy again."

Erik pointed to a button. "All you have to do is power it up, then push this button and you'll dematerialize out. It's already programmed. Remember which button. Don't make a mistake. Also be certain you're holding the babies or they won't go with you."

"All three?"

"Get them in your arms or on your lap somehow. You've got to have a hold on them. I know it'll be difficult but it's the only way."

"What about everyone else?"

Erik shook his head. "The device isn't strong enough for any additional people. I could only program this for two adults. Or for one adult—you—and the babies. Nobody can help you. Don't let them. If more than you four try to dematerialize out at the same time, none of you will survive."

Her eyes widened.

At her reaction, Braden swore to himself. He hated to frighten her but she had to know the dangers. "Keep this emergency plan to yourself, Alexa. We don't think anyone would actually object, given the circumstances. Not after what Laszlo related to us about the Reign of Three. But no reason to cause any additional tension down here. Just in case."

"Okay. Um, if we have to go, we'll be all alone up there. What if something goes wrong? What do I do?"

"Nothing will go wrong." When a wary look crossed her face, Braden again felt bad, understanding just how scary this must be for her. "I know it's a lot to take in." He put his arm around her. "Try not to worry. You might not even need this. In fact, you probably won't. It's a just-in-case option."

"My head is spinning."

"It'll be all right, Alexa," Erik said. "It's a simple plan and will work if you need to use it. As long as you follow our instructions."

"If you do dematerialize out, you'll need a survival pack," Braden continued. "I'll make one up for you. I want you to have it with you at all times so you'll be ready. We'll fit it into a Xylon jacket." He reached down and pulled a disrupter from his boot. "I want you to take this too."

"Where'd you find that?" Erik asked, his eyes widening.

"In one of the ships."

Alexa pushed it away. "No. You need that. Whoever is going to Earth will need a firearm. I can't take it. It wouldn't be right."

"We have Warriors on Earth who can arm us," Braden told her.

"Not enough for everyone. Earth will need every advanced weapon they can get. You've already said so."

"Do you remember everything I say?"

"When necessary."

He felt a scowl cross his face and worked hard to force it away. "One weapon, more or less, isn't going to make any significant difference."

"I'm not taking it, Braden."

"Alexa..."

"I'm not arguing with you about this. No one is on this spaceport place. No one will know I'm there, right? If someone other than a Warrior does come, I'll just hide until he leaves. Besides, I hate those disruptors. I'm not trained to use one. It would be too easy to have an accident."

Braden felt reluctant to leave her unarmed, though her words made sense. She looked scared to death. He knew she would feel much safer armed with something she could effectively use to protect herself and the babies.

"Braden will send help as soon as possible," Erik said. "It might not be right away, depending on our situation, so use your supplies well." A small smile appeared on his face. "I've brought a little something extra for you. I think it will make everyone feel better."

"Something extra?" Braden looked at Erik in surprise. "What do you have?"

Erik pulled out a pain inducer—a small handheld weapon for close-range use. It induced compliance or punishment, in prisoners mostly, and delivered a wide range of shocks when applied to the skin. It was also very easy to use. No training was necessary, just a basic instruction session on its functionality. It would be virtually useless in their battle against the Egesa on Earth but was perfect for Alexa's situation.

"Where'd you get that?" Braden asked.

"Leila. She always carries one. She told me it's gotten her out of a jam more than once. It's not as good as a disruptor but quite effective in a pinch. Just don't let anyone know you have it, Alexa, because you can only use this directly against skin. If you get into a tight situation, pull it out when you see a chance. I've got it set on max. Push the red button and hit your target. It's not going to kill whoever you zap unless they have some sort of advanced heart condition. But it'll give you ample time to get away and hide. It's reusable, so keep it with you. Just don't fiddle with the settings. And don't touch the pad after you've activated it. Once the target is hit, it will automatically shut off, so you have to hit the red button each time. The charge is strong. You don't have to worry about it giving out."

"Perfect. Thanks, Erik." Braden appreciated Erik's concern for his family more than he could ever say. "Does Leila know you took that?"

"Yes, she offered. I told her about the plan. Sorry, Braden. She caught me working on the devices when she stopped by our quarters to pick up some medical notes she'd made last night. I hadn't expected her to do that but she won't tell anyone. She gave me her word."

Braden nodded. He turned to Alexa. "We need you to get the babies ready to take to medical now."

"Wait, everything is going too fast here. Why are we going to medical? Leila said she didn't need to see the babies again until tomorrow."

"I'm going to pull Pitch from guard duty to help Erik with the orbiters. I need to do some computer work, so I'll be watching over you and the triplets."

"I'm armed now." She smiled at him, albeit a bit shakily. "The babies will be more comfortable here. We don't need to relocate."

Braden glanced at Erik before meeting her gaze again. "I'd feel better if you stayed with me for now."

Alexa's smile faded and she looked at him hard. "Is something else going on? What aren't you telling me?"

"Tell her, Braden. She has a right to know."

Alexa looked from him to Erik and back to him again.

Braden couldn't fault Erik for saying something. He was right. She needed to be on alert for the sake of herself and the babies. "Someone down here contacted Frost. She and the Egesa might be on their way."

"What? How? Who?"

"We don't have a lot of details yet. I want to see if I can find any evidence or information in the computer system." He didn't want to tell her about suspecting Halah and detaining her and Kam. Not if he didn't have to.

"I thought we couldn't communicate with anyone up top."

"We can't. Not with the installed equipment. Someone down here has to have a preconfigured handheld comm device, set for the proper frequency to send and receive pulse codes from Frost."

"I can't believe anyone down here would..." Her voice trailed off. "Who would have the skills to do that?"

"Probably everyone except you and Josella."

He saw worry and fear enter her face. "Don't worry. Please. If the worst happens, we'll take the babies and go to the decontamination room. That's the safest place." He looked around. "Where is Josella, by the way? We need her."

"Leila called for her to go to medical. Something about them possibly needing her for the Initiation. Leila wanted to do some tests on her first."

"Well, hell," Erik said. "We've got everyone else on duty or otherwise occupied."

"You and I can handle the triplets, Braden," Alexa said.

"Not if Frost shows up or if I'm fighting off an Egesa. I'd like someone else close and available at all times."

Alexa chewed her bottom lip a moment, then released it. "What about Delemar? Is he assigned to anything?"

Braden's brow furrowed.

"Yeah, where the hell is he?" Erik asked.

"I passed him once in the corridor but that was a while back. He's probably sulking somewhere, since his power and privilege no longer carry any weight." Braden walked over to the comm panel and pressed a button. "Delemar, this is Braden. Report." When he didn't get an immediate response, he walked back to Alexa. He rested a hand on her shoulder. "Go ahead and get the babies ready while Erik and I talk to Pitch."

"All right." She leaned forward and kissed Braden's cheek. "We miss you," she whispered in his ear.

"Me too," he whispered back.

Erik cleared his throat. "We need to get on this, Braden."

Braden turned toward Erik and straightened his shoulders. "Yes of course."

"Thank Leila for me," Alexa said. "For the weapon."

Erik gave her a quick wink. "You bet."

With Erik in step beside him, Braden headed toward the corridor where Pitch was standing guard. Braden let the door to his quarters slide shut behind him and Erik before he said anything. "I'm replacing you for now. I want you to help Erik secure the orbiters. We're going to take Alexa and the triplets to medical where I can watch them while I'm doing some computer work." He hesitated a beat before continuing. "We have a traitor among us."

"A traitor?" Pitch's eyes widened. "Who?"

"We don't know for certain," Erik said. "But someone sent a message to Frost from the subcommand station."

"Frost? Shit. Wait. Sent a message? They'd need an independent communication device for that. Something they could channel through our system outside Xylon's grid."

"Yeah, we know," Erik replied.

"Why aren't you assigning me to track it down? I'm head of security. I'm more likely to be able to find out who sent it, when the message was sent and even what it said."

"We need your security expertise to lock down the orbiters once the programming is completed." He didn't want anyone to be able to sabotage those ships again. If the malfunction had indeed been sabotage.

Pitch looked back and forth between them. "You two are just as skilled in ship security as I am. I'm more skilled in computer security. What's going on here?" His eyes suddenly grew even larger than they had a moment ago. "You don't think I'm the traitor do you?"

Braden saw how upset the possibility made Pitch. He was a good officer. Always had been. Smart and quick. Braden clapped his shoulder. "No. Don't give it a thought. I just feel that I need to be with my family while this threat is looming. Once you're done, if I haven't found anything on the computer, you can take over."

"All right," Pitch answered, still sounding a bit wary.

Erik held out his hand. "Give me your disruptor."

Surprise crossed Pitch's face. "You want my weapon? Why?" He glanced over at Braden, concern even more evident in his voice now.

"You won't need it as long as you're not protecting Alexa," Erik explained.

His stare returned to Erik and narrowed slightly. "You won't need it either. And since we'll be working together in the same space, what's the point?"

Erik's eyes hardened in response. "Are you refusing a direct order, Warrior?"

Pitch stiffened. He hesitated in his response. But only for a moment. "Um, no. Of course not." He handed over the disruptor, though reluctantly.

Braden knew a security officer felt naked without his weapon. He would swear that Tara had slept with hers. As a command officer, Erik had a right to a weapon if one was

available and taking it didn't jeopardize a life or a project. He would have ordered likewise. Pitch knew the regulations, whether he agreed with them or not.

"If Frost or the Egesa show up, everyone needs to congregate in the decontamination room. We'll be able to control the atmosphere from in there and can suffocate anyone outside the room. Since we don't have many weapons, that might be our only chance. If this facility is breached, whoever can get to a comm panel first needs to send out an alarm with instructions."

"Will do, Braden," Erik and Pitch both answered in unison.

"All right." Braden nodded. "Let's get my family moved."

Chapter Thirteen

When Leila and Josella reentered the conference room, Sam's head turned, his attention immediately zeroing in on the women, eager and also very anxious to hear what they had to say. Laszlo entered close behind them as if he'd been waiting in the corridor. Brianna had returned earlier and Sam looked over at her. A mixture of concern, wariness and anticipation showed on her face. Her feelings obviously mirrored his own.

They rose from the chairs they'd found in the corner behind one of the hanging sheets. They walked over to greet everyone. Sam's heart rate picked up as he waited for the news.

"Well?" Laszlo asked. "What were the test results?"

"She's compatible," Leila answered. "She won't be severely affected."

Won't be *severely* affected—the words echoed in Sam's head. "But she will be affected?" The test results sounded less than reassuring to him.

"She most likely won't be fully protected from all adverse affects. But the chemicals shouldn't harm her in any permanent way. And she's agreed to be a part of the rite."

Sam breathed an inward sigh of relief, feeling much better. He noticed a slight blush cross Josella's face and she purposely didn't look at him. Or so it seemed. She probably was not as sexually liberated as the Warriors. He knew her to be from another planet and Halah's half sister but that's all he knew about her, other than that she wasn't mated. She didn't talk much. Needing to reassure her of her choices, he reached out and touched her hand.

Her head snapped up and she looked at him in surprise.

"Are you sure you're all right with this?" He didn't want any woman to feel forced into having sex with him. Even though the stakes were high, Josella had no ties to Earth and this really wasn't her fight.

"Yes. Of course. I understand how important the rite is. I want to help."

"I only want you to do this if you're truly going to be okay with it. Because if you're not, even knowing you're helping isn't going to make you comfortable. From what I understand, I might not be in full control of myself at all times. I don't want you living with any regrets, given what's going to happen in here."

She squeezed his hand. "I'll be all right. Really. I understand what might happen. Leila explained it to me."

Brianna eased her arm through his. "She's good to go, Sam. You don't need to coddle her."

He dropped Josella's hand and glanced at Brianna. Her move and clipped words held a very distinct tone of jealousy. As did the look in her eyes. He almost chuckled but thought better of it.

Still, he didn't want to take advantage of Josella. Maybe she wasn't as shy and inexperienced as he'd first assumed though, for she seemed certain in her decision.

They had few options and he was grateful for her willingness to participate, so he hoped she wouldn't change her mind once the rite started. As he understood things, she wouldn't need to get involved unless Brianna required help. Maybe she'd simply end up being an observer. The others thought otherwise but very little seemed to be going as planned or expected lately.

"Josella is ready," Laszlo said, echoing Brianna's words, seemingly convinced enough to proceed without further delay. "I'll call Kam in for standby."

Sam stiffened. Kam? Laszlo couldn't be serious. Not a good choice. On more than one level. He didn't say anything for he doubted his words would carry any weight in the situation. He had to wonder though... How would Halah react if her mate needed to fuck her sister? In his mind, Pitch would have made a better choice. Not that he wanted any males present but Pitch wasn't mated. Besides, he'd seen Pitch and Josella making eyes at one another.

Josella cleared her throat. "Kam?" The tone in her voice reflected her own apparent concerns.

"Yes, Kam. Is there a problem?"

Sam didn't understand how Laszlo wouldn't realize that Kam presented a problem. He saw it clearly and Josella obviously saw it. Maybe not being able to identify, think through and analyze the possible outcome of situations was part of Laszlo's weakness. A mental weakness that Sam hadn't noticed before now. As he glanced at Josella, he felt sorry for the young woman. She was in a very awkward position all the way around.

"I don't think Halah—" When a frustrated look crossed Laszlo's face, she quieted and lowered her eyes.

Sam's protective instincts rose to a level he couldn't ignore. He had to speak up about this, even if they all dismissed his words. "Wouldn't Pitch be a better idea, Laszlo? No personal connection exists with him that might cause a problem later."

"Yes, Pitch." Josella's eyes lit up and she shot him a grateful look.

"No," Laszlo and Brianna answered at the same time.

Sam looked over at Brianna. He studied the odd look on her face, wondering what her objection could be.

"Pitch is guarding Alexa and the triplets," Laszlo said.

Sam's eyes returned to Laszlo. "Replace him with Kam."

"Pitch's presence could cause too many problems in here. Earthlings are not known for containing their jealousies. I'm sure Brianna has informed you of their past association. I'm a bit surprised you even suggested him."

"Association?"

"Laszlo," Brianna said. "I haven't—"

"There won't be a problem with Kam," Leila supplied quickly. "Xylons don't hold the same restrictive relationship attitudes when it comes to Initiation participation."

"Josella and I aren't Xylons. Not even partly. What association? Brianna? What did that mean?" Obviously it was something important or Laszlo wouldn't have brought it up.

"I'm sorry, Brianna. I just assumed—"

"That's all right, Laszlo." With a sigh, Brianna pulled Sam aside and lowered her voice as she spoke. "There are a couple of issues here that could cause us problems. Relationship issues. Pitch might not be able to handle seeing you with Josella. I'm sure you've seen his interest in her. It could adversely affect the rite's outcome."

"But Xylons don't mind sharing during Initiations. At other times too, from what I know. More than one of you have said as much. And Leila just confirmed it."

"It's not that simple. You're not a Warrior. You don't play by the same rules or think the same. We do feel jealousy, Sam. It's a normal emotion, even for us. It's just that situations exist in our society where we have a more open or relaxed attitude."

"Yes. This is one of them, right?"

"Normally it would be. An Initiation is a duty. It's not personal. But our situation down here is anything but normal. Including this ceremony."

"Hmm. All right. I'll give you that." When she said nothing further, he realized he'd have to ask once again for an explanation of Laszlo's words. "What's this association thing about?"

Brianna looked away a moment before once more meeting his gaze. "Um, Pitch and I have been together. At a Joining Party. It didn't mean anything special. It was just sex. It's what happens at those gatherings. I didn't see the point in telling you."

"You and—" Sam's head was spinning and he clenched his fingers into fists. She had been with Pitch. Sexually. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, working hard at maintaining his control. He knew he couldn't very well fault her for what she'd done before they met. He hadn't exactly been a choir boy himself. But still, the fact bothered him.

If Pitch had ended up involved in the ceremony and had sprung that bit of info on him either on purpose or by accident during the rite, Sam would have gone nuts. He was glad he'd found out beforehand.

Now he was going to say something completely out of character but more was at stake here than just his own desires. "I still think Pitch is the better choice to join us."

"Why?" Brianna looked at him in surprise.

"He and Josella will be comfortable together. You and he will be comfortable together. The other choices are Kam, Erik, Delemar or Laszlo. Laszlo isn't well. Delemar

is too old. Erik and Kam are mated. And I don't care what you say, I can't believe that wouldn't cause a problem down the line."

"How would it feel for you to have Pitch here? Especially knowing I was with him. Earth's sexual attitudes are quite different from ours. If it causes a problem during the rite, it could jeopardize the entire Initiation."

"I'd rather not have any males here at all. You know that. Pitch, well, I'll contain any negative feelings I might have. If you say it was just sex between you two, then I'll believe that and try to keep in mind the differences between our two cultures and the sexual attitudes of each." He wasn't quite convinced he could really do that, though the words sounded good to his ears.

"Are you sure?"

No. He wasn't sure about anything, especially lately. "If it's Pitch, at least he'll be the only one I need to deal with in my head. Unless you've had sex with someone else down here too." If so, he might need to punch something just to get the frustration out of his system.

A smile tugged at her lips. "No. No one else who's down here."

As they spoke, Laszlo walked over to the comm panel. "Kam, this is Laszlo. Report."

Sam's head turned. "He's still going with Kam."

"I'll tell him I concur with the decision to use Pitch. It might carry some weight."

A male voice filtered into the room before Brianna spoke up. "Laszlo, this is Braden. Kam is otherwise engaged."

A look of relief crossed Josella's face.

Laszlo obviously didn't feel the same for a low growl escaped his throat. He turned his head. "Looks like you will get your Warrior of choice," he said before turning back to Braden. "Then send Pitch."

"Also engaged."

The look on Josella's face immediately fell and deep disappointment showed in her wide green eyes.

"Well, un-engage him. We need him for standby in the Initiation. None of the Branded women can participate."

"Everyone is on emergency projects right now and can't be pulled. Except Delemar, though he's not answering my calls and I can't find him."

Laszlo's brow furrowed and he seemed deep in thought. After a moment his expression changed to resignation and his shoulders sagged. "Send either Pitch, Kam or Erik over here as soon as one of them becomes available. I'll take anyone I can get."

"Will do."

Laszlo turned back to them and frowned. "Whoever is freed from their other duties first will participate. That's just how it has to be. I wanted Kam here because he has the

most experience with alien-involved Initiations and is also more knowledgeable of Earth's customs and morals than the others. If it's one of the others though, we'll use whoever we can get. In the meantime, we'll make do. If absolutely necessary, I can help out."

"I don't recommend you participate, Laszlo," Leila said. "While your system is out of kilter, it wouldn't be wise and could weaken you further."

"Let's not worry about my system right now. We need to get started with this before time gets away from us. The rite we'll be performing is a transitional ceremony. It is not the same as a regular Initiation, though the steps will be similar. Obviously, we cannot put all Earth males through this. Time-wise it's not feasible and many would refuse outright. For those who did agree, they might balk at certain steps. It would not work. So what Leila and I have come up with is a way to get Briggs protected enough to survive an attack by an Egesa or exposure to their alien diseases. We will then extract the protective substances from his sperm and synthesize it into a formula that other Earth males can be injected with to provide the same protection."

Sam went over the steps of the Initiation in his head. Not those just related by Laszlo but the details that Brianna had informed him of while they'd been waiting for the test results. Everything these people did revolved around sex in some way, even their medical procedures. Sex seemed to be the center of their whole existence. Not that he was complaining. He just felt amazed by it all.

"Won't you need another full-flooded Earth male to test the final formula on?" Brianna asked.

"Yes," Leila answered. "We'll have to test it on Earth. We'll ask for a scientist or male military volunteer after we get there."

"And if it doesn't work?" Sam asked.

"There won't be anything more we can do."

Sam didn't like the sound of that. It was all such a long shot. Everything was working against them—from the outside poisonous gases that might still kill them if they couldn't effectively configure the decontamination room, to relying on a couple of ships in who knew what condition, to hoping the Warriors' outposts still existed, to this Initiation, to getting all the way back to Earth, to the formula actually working after they got there.

Laszlo clapped him on the back. "One worry at a time, Colonel."

He nodded, knowing his feelings must have shown on his face. He did his best to force neutrality into his features. Letting his thoughts and feelings show could be turned against him in a critical moment. His training had taught him that. He knew better than to relax his guard in a group setting like this. Particularly an alien setting.

"Shall we begin?" Laszlo asked.

"Yes." He wanted this ceremony to be over. He knew his turbulent feelings came from knowing that their chemicals might make him act out of character. Also because

the longer they delayed, the closer the Egesa would get to Earth and the less time they'd have to prepare to fight the enemy.

"Where should I be?" Josella asked.

Brianna waved her hand. "Stay in the back. If we need you, I'll let you know."

Josella moved to the far side of the room and disappeared behind one of the hanging sheets. Sam still worried about the young woman. He hoped he didn't end up hurting her in any way. Brianna remained close at his side and he had the same worries about her. Being out of control was not something he was used to.

"I hope she stays out of the way," Brianna said.

"Don't be so harsh with Josella," Sam whispered to her. "It's only a duty. Remember?" Given the sexual attitude of Xylons, her reaction to Josella surprised him. But then Brianna had said that they did feel jealousy. He didn't understand their society or mores. They seemed contradictory at best. Of course, he expected Earth's customs and morals were an equal puzzle to them.

"I wasn't harsh." She looked up at him and her eyes softened. "Well, I didn't mean to be. I just want this to go smoothly."

He reached out and squeezed her hand. "Me too."

Leila pulled out a three-pronged needle. "The chemicals that will alter your system and provide protection are inside Brianna and slightly altered versions are on the instruments we will use on you. This injection will help your system to process those chemicals and will help you retain your erections longer."

He grunted. "I hope this goes easier than the last time."

"I hope so too," she replied, a worried look on her face. "Take off your uniform please."

Sam stripped the uniform from his body and stood there in his underwear. Shy he was not. A quality that came in handy. Brianna took the uniform from him and went to place it elsewhere, giving him time alone with Leila for the injection. "This isn't going to kill me, is it?"

"Not the injection."

He cocked an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "As before, your sexual needs must be met, otherwise brain damage and death could occur. It is not likely but possible. And with your Earth physiology –"

"In other words, you really don't know what's going to happen."

"Not for certain. This is new territory. But I spoke to Brianna about what happened during the last try at an Initiation and I've made some adjustments to the original formula that was used on you. In theory, this should work." She cleaned a spot on his arm, then raised the needle and injected him.

In theory. And he was the lab rat. Not a comfortable feeling. He felt three needles penetrate his arm. It really didn't hurt as much as he thought it would and after she stepped back there was no blood. "How long before I feel the effects?"

"Not long. I'm going to step out now. Laszlo and I will be observing, in case there is a problem. Don't worry. By tomorrow it will all be over."

"Yeah. One way or the other. Right?"

She smiled slightly, in apparent concern and understanding, then turned and stepped out of the room.

* * * * *

Alexa paced back and forth in medical. She glanced at the triplets who were sleeping soundly. They were such good babies. She never would have believed that she could love so much. She'd protect those little ones with her life. Nobody and nothing would ever hurt them if she could help it.

Delemar never had reported in, which she found strange. He had to be around somewhere. Why would he ignore Braden's call? Certainly he wasn't so childish as to hold a grudge about his loss of power and ignore what was happening down here by refusing to help.

Something didn't feel right about all this. A lot of things didn't feel right.

She looked toward the other side of the room where Braden now sat in front of the computer. Erik and Pitch had returned to the orbiters on the sublevel. She felt much safer with Braden near, despite what she'd said earlier.

She stuck her hand in her jacket pocket, a Warrior jacket that Braden had given her to wear. She fingered the transport-connector. The device scared her to death. How was she going to get all three babies safely dematerialized out, by herself? She prayed she didn't have to use the thing. Or the pain inducer in her other pocket.

Leila had been very generous to give her the weapon. She figured Leila would need to go on the mission to Earth in order to administer the protective chemicals to the military. She could have benefited from keeping the weapon for herself.

Alexa was grateful for the pain inducer though. It made her feel safer. Still, she wouldn't be able to calm down completely until they made it to the Ice Moon and she could be assured of her children's safety.

Later she'd don a survival pack after Braden got it put together. From what she understood, a wear-ready one was in stock but he wanted to put one together specifically targeting her and their babies' needs. She'd need to wear it or have it nearby at all times, just like the jacket. Braden had said the pack would fit under her jacket. She couldn't imagine how. Whatever food or water it contained would have to be minimal. She felt stressed to the max and wondered if this ordeal would ever truly end.

"Stop, Alexa," Braden growled, as he typed commands on the keyboard.

She stopped pacing and turned toward him. "What?"

"Stand still. You're making me nervous and I can't concentrate."

"I can't just stand still." Since being down in this shelter, she'd felt such a lack of control. Like a rat trapped in a maze with the walls slowly closing in on her. It had even gotten harder to breathe, though she knew that was just stress on her part.

"Well, do something else."

"What else am I supposed to do? The babies have been fed, changed and are asleep." Luckily, they'd been able to construct a pile of makeshift diapers from the medical supplies. Now that her little ones were quiet and content, she needed to be involved more, to be doing something to help all of them get out of this auxiliary shelter.

"Then rest. You're going to need all you can get."

"I can't rest. I'm too worked up."

Braden scooted a bit to the side. "All right. Pull up a chair and help me go over these videos. Maybe we can figure out who contacted Frost."

She walked over and pulled up a chair next to him. "I thought there weren't any vid-monitors down on the sublevel."

"There aren't. Right now, I'm just looking for footage of who all went down there since we've been here. The ladder-wells are monitored. In the meantime, the computer is doing a search for any file that contains Frost's name or her ship's identification numbers. Between the two, maybe we can figure this out."

Alexa looked at the screen in confusion. "What are we looking at? Is this recent?"

"Yes. Each video file covers a twenty-four-hour period. I figured it was better to start at the end and go backward a day at a time."

"Can you speed it up any more than this?" The video moved quickly on the screen but not at a speed that was time effective in her opinion. They'd be here forever if they had to view very many files.

"Unfortunately no. This speed is the best I can do."

"Well, that's crappy. So much for advanced technology. I thought you'd have some sort of advanced sci-fi technology like I've seen in the movies."

Braden laughed. "Yes, your Earth movies are very entertaining from what I've seen. Though not very accurate or realistic. This equipment is quite old. Some systems down here were upgraded, most weren't. This particular facility is also the oldest and the deepest. Most of the other underground shelters are more advanced than this one. The Xylon Council probably didn't feel the monitoring equipment was important enough to bother with in all the shelters. I was never directly involved in those meetings, so it's just a guess. Most of our video systems, well the ones in the Lair, could do an independent analysis of footage, keying on whatever criteria we gave it. The system down here isn't that advanced, so we're going to have to rely on eyeball power."

"Wait!" Alexa couldn't believe what she was seeing on the screen. "Is that Torque pushing Kam and Halah down the corridor? What's going on?" It looked as if her brother and Halah were tied up.

"Um, yeah. They've been confined to quarters."

She looked at him in disbelief. "You're not still doubting Kam's loyalty, are you? We need every person down here working to get us out. They need another participant for the Initiation. That ceremony can't fail or Earth is doomed. You know that."

"I thought it best to confine Kam and Halah for now. For everyone's safety."

"Safety? Why? What happened?"

"There's some question about whether Halah was involved in the message sent to Frost. I found her at the computer with the connection pulled up."

"You did?" Oh, how she prayed Halah wasn't guilty. For all of their sakes, but especially for her brother's. "And Kam? Was he there too?" If so, proving his innocence might be near impossible.

"No. He didn't seem to be directly involved. But he'd never stand for Halah to be locked up without trying to get her out and I can't watch him every moment. He'd be useless in the Initiation if he knew Halah was confined somewhere. Brianna can manage for now. I'll send Erik to help out when he finishes with the orbiters."

"Erik? Why not Pitch?" She knew Josella had feelings for Pitch and she thought the two would make a nice couple.

"We'll need Pitch to find proof of the communication to Frost in the files. Unless you and I find something first."

"What did Halah say about all this?"

"She said that she found the connection active and was trying to figure out what was going on when I came up on her. Unfortunately, the connection was broken before we could ascertain much."

"You think she was lying?"

"I don't know. But she does have a history of switching sides, depending on what she wants."

"I know but— Do you think she would actually betray us?"

Alexa respected Braden's opinion and needed to know his thoughts. He could very well be the final word when it came to her brother's fate. Since Kam was Halah's breeder-mate and Alexa knew they loved each other, she figured whatever happened to one would happen to the other. They'd never leave one another alone to face an uncertain future.

"I'd made up my mind that she and Kam weren't traitors before this happened. But now..." He shook his head. "I just don't know."

Alexa frowned. "It's not like you to sound unsure."

He pulled at the collar of his uniform. "I don't want to make a mistake."

"Can I talk to Kam? He must feel so abandoned." She believed in her brother. She knew he had a good heart and would never purposely harm any of them. No one would ever convince her otherwise.

"Sorry. His comm panel is inoperable. Torque pulled the wires."

"Why?"

"I didn't want them going to Laszlo. We don't need more problems or division within the ranks."

"Well, I don't believe Kam is a traitor. Nor do I think he would choose a mate who would betray us." She trusted her brother and she trusted her brother's judgment. Completely.

Chapter Fourteen

Sam felt, well, horny. That was the only way to describe it.

Whatever Leila had shot him up with was apparently designed to do more than help him process chemicals. He hadn't even come in contact with any yet and he was already feeling the effects.

Of course, she'd also said it would help him maintain an erection. But the shot was doing more than that. It had helped him actually *get* an erection without any extra sexual stimulation.

And produced a side effect...

Erotic visions. Leila hadn't told him about experiencing those. He rubbed his temple as sexual images of all sorts, from sweet to savage, filtered through his brain. Similar to the numerous daydreams he'd had of Brianna but much more intense, involving scenes with multiple partners and bondage. Though Brianna always remained at the center. Her pleasure foremost on his mind.

He reached out and pulled her closer. He was glad that she'd stayed by his side. He needed her—a warm woman with a moist pussy, ready to fuck. She didn't protest or even look surprised. She only smiled. His cock grew so hard he thought it would burst out of his underwear.

She rubbed up against him. "So it begins," she said with a smile. She stroked his cheek and when she spoke again, she lowered her voice to a purr. "Don't worry. I'll take good care of you."

A sexual tingle traveled down his spine. Strangely, though her words remained clear enough for him to understand, she sounded far away. His brain felt in a fog all of a sudden. Well, not exactly a fog. But something.

He did trust her to take care of him, so he wasn't worried about his physical wellbeing. Mentally? His thought processes seemed all right, just different. Slower. Heavier. Obscured. He didn't know. The sensation was hard to describe.

But he knew one thing clearly. He needed to fuck. He laced his fingers through the back of her hair and covered her lips with his.

Her mouth opened and his tongue plunged inside, teasing and tasting her. She mewled against his mouth. She tasted wonderful—hot and needy.

His free hand worked loose the front of her uniform. He couldn't wait to see her naked again. Touch her. Taste her cunt. Fuck her. When he released her hair and yanked down the top of her garment, she gasped into his mouth.

They broke the kiss and he stood staring at her, his breathing rapid. She was completely naked on top. Her gorgeous full breasts outdid any he'd ever known. The slightly longer nipples looked as incredibly suckable as he knew them to be.

His gaze rose to meet hers and his fingers slowly danced down her arms. He never took his eyes off her and she never looked away from him. She just smiled and a smoldering look built in her eyes. She grazed her fingernails down his bare chest, sending shivers of delight throughout his body. Oh yes. She wanted him again. Just as badly as he wanted her. Intense sexual visions played through his mind, the same ones as he'd had earlier. He wanted to make each and every one of them a reality.

He grabbed her and jerked her against him, once more covering her mouth with his. Her nipples pressed hard against his bare chest, feeling like pricks of fire along his suddenly ultra-sensitive skin.

His tongue dueled with hers until neither of them could breathe. He broke the kiss and dragged his tongue down her neck, moving lower until poised just above one of those luscious nipples he ached to taste. His hand cupped her breast and he sucked the plump peak into his mouth.

Brianna's fingers dug into his shoulders.

He sucked greedily, unable to get enough of the sweet taste. He swirled his tongue around the bud, then tugged on it with his teeth, nibbling until she moaned. They awkwardly sank to their knees, his mouth never leaving her nipple.

Once he pushed her flat onto her back, her fingers tangled in his hair. He took the fleshy nipple in his mouth, sucking on it again, drawing hard.

"Bite it," she whispered in a breathy voice.

Ah yes! He took the nipple in his teeth and bit lightly. When she clawed at his head, he bit harder, until she squealed. After soothing the bite with his tongue, he chewed lightly on the tip. She moaned and squirmed beneath him.

He released her nipple and gave it several long licks before pulling away completely. A delicious appetizer to what was to come.

He rose up and looked into her eyes. His fingers grazed her flesh, then squeezed her mounds gently as he massaged both breasts. Her green eyes burned into his and he saw her emotions. Need, understanding, caring. All wrapped into one. He had to make this good for her.

Though concentrating on her pleasure and his own, he remembered the steps he needed to follow. He was supposed to lick her cunt, make her climax and consume her cream to obtain the healing elements he needed.

A smile tugged at his lips. Not a problem. He enjoyed eating her. He'd done so before and now, with these new chemicals inside him, her cum would serve an even more important role.

His hands slid over her ribs and down her flat stomach. He yanked at the bottom of her uniform, stripping the garment off her legs, along with her boots. That's when he

realized he still had his own boots on. His brain was definitely sex-fried or something. He was surprised he'd shucked his uniform without getting caught up on them or even noticing he'd still had them on.

He pulled off his boots and tossed them into a corner, regretting the abrupt action when he heard the thud and remembered the transmitter. But it should be all right. The device had been constructed to take a lot of abuse.

His gaze returned to Brianna, waiting on the mat for him to fuck her. She wore some sort of stringed underwear, barely a patch, covering her pussy. He ripped it off.

She gasped and arched, not in protest but in need. He recognized her physical desire by the way her body flushed. He glanced across the room and saw Josella watching, peeking around a curtain. He winked at her, sexual images of the three of them rolling through his head like some erotic movie. Soon she would join them. He felt it instinctively.

He seemed to be switching in and out of clarity, going from total awareness to deeply sexual stirrings and images to primitive emotions so strong he wasn't certain how long he could maintain control. He wasn't even certain he wanted to maintain control. He certainly didn't want to maintain sexual control. Not with Brianna anyway.

His attention switched back to the sexy Xylon Warrior he'd begun to think of as *his*. He pushed her thighs apart, then slid his hands beneath her ass. He lowered himself to her pussy and inhaled her special scent. He ached to plunge his cock inside her. But he also ached to taste her, to fuck her with his tongue and get as deeply as humanly possible. He buried his face between her thighs and licked slowly at her cunt, grazing all her sensitive areas.

Her fingers touched his head lightly, then slid into the strands and tightened in his hair. "Yes, yes." She bucked against him. "Suck my clit, Sam."

He sucked her clit into his mouth and drew hard on the plump bit of flesh. Making this woman come was a need so great in him that he wouldn't stop until she was completely satisfied and couldn't take any more.

Brianna knew the sexual fever was overtaking Sam. The glow she saw in his eyes and the heat coming off his body were unmistakable. He'd responded more quickly to the formula than she'd expected. He still seemed in control of his actions and emotions. For now. That would most likely change soon. Though with his Earth physiology, they didn't know for certain how he'd respond to the chemicals.

She didn't want to think about that. At the moment she was so close to coming that other thoughts faded next to concentrating on the ultimate pleasure she knew he could give her. "Ah..."

His tongue flicked against her clit and she moaned. "Yes, lick me!"

When she turned her head, the reflector on the wall caught her eye. She knew Lazlo and Leila were watching. She didn't mind them watching. It just increased the intensity. Sex was an integral part of Xylon society and not something Warriors shied away from. Besides, they were her safety cushion in case something went wrong during the rite.

This ceremony was about a whole lot more than sex. Sam shifted and pushed his tongue into her pussy. "Oh yes...deeper." She squirmed, pushed her body against him. He curled his tongue inside her and she went wild. If he even grazed her clit now, she'd come hard. He stabbed a finger into her cunt, along with his tongue.

"Oh!" She released his hair and rose up on her elbows to watch him fuck and lick her. So sexy. No man had ever put his tongue and his finger inside her cunt at the same time. She couldn't get enough of the sight. "Lick faster," she begged. "Finger-fuck me harder."

His eyes briefly met hers, intensity shining in their depths. He hesitated only a moment, then he finger-fucked her fast and hard, as his tongue moved wildly inside her.

"Yes!"

She reached down to rub her clit, but he caught her hand, stopping her. He pulled his tongue from her cunt, replacing it with another finger, then sucked her clit into his mouth. He bit down on the fleshy bud.

Her body tightened. "Ah...oh!" She came and her body bowed. The orgasm rolled through her in waves. Sam finger-fucked her harder. "Yes! Oh, Sam!"

This was the intensity she craved. He sucked and licked her clit. Her body shook as sexual feelings overtook her in waves. Then he bit down on the bud of nerves once more.

On the explosive surge of pleasure that exploded inside her, she shrieked. Over and over, the ecstasy rolled through her. Then she collapsed onto the mat with a sigh. Satiated and happy.

Sam pulled his finger out of Brianna's pussy and sucked off her cum. He leaned back down and licked her pussy clean, getting every delicious drop. Her body twitched, but other than that, she didn't move.

He rose onto his knees and glanced toward the mirror. Knowing others had been watching, as well as Josella from across the room, had excited him more than he'd thought it would. His gaze shifted back to Brianna.

After coming, she looked so beautiful. Soft and content. A small smile on her lips. He wiped his mouth and cheeks of her moisture.

He glanced down at himself. His cock tented his underwear and he thought he might come right there if he didn't get inside her soon. He stood, hooked his thumbs in his boxers and rid himself of the piece of cotton.

As he dropped back to his knees, Brianna's gaze zeroed in between his legs. The sensual smile that graced her lips made him feel sexy as hell.

He hoped they had the opportunity later to explore some sort of future together, for they'd forged a special connection in Laszlo's quarters. Earth and Xylon had an alliance now, so the possibility existed that they could remain in contact, though he knew obstacles would exist.

A soft, needy sound reached his ears from across the room and he glanced over. Josella sat there staring, her gaze fixated on his cock. He smiled. His fingers curled around his shaft. Even his own hand felt good, though a moist cunt or a woman's mouth would be better. He pumped his cock slowly, giving them both a good show.

He wanted to allow Brianna a bit of time to recover and then he'd entice her into wanting more. Much more. He intended to fuck her every way possible. After only a few moments though, she sat up and scooted closer, swatting away his hand.

The Xylons' appetite for sex had proven very much to his liking. Her fingers lightly traced his veined shaft from tip to base, then lowered to massage his balls. He groaned, more than happy to allow her to touch and explore him.

"Are all Earth men so well endowed?"

"I got lucky," he answered in a tight, deep voice, grateful for good genetics.

"I think I'm the one who got lucky." Her tongue flicked against the tip of his cock.

"Ah!" She knew just what to say to make him feel as if he were better than any other man. Special even. He was so in need that his dick, normally a dark red when aroused, had turned almost purple. Her tongue flattened against the underside below the head and he about came unglued.

His fingers plunged into her thick brown hair. His brain and body became consumed by the need for sex. Nothing else mattered. "Suck it!"

Brianna swirled her tongue around the head of his cock.

"You're killing me. Don't lick. Suck. Now!" he ordered, unable to control his aggressive tone. He needed to feel her mouth consuming him, her lips against his flesh, eager for his cum.

She moved forward and sucked him into her mouth.

"Yes..." He urged her to take more than just the cock head, which she willingly and easily did. As her mouth moved farther down his shaft, he knew he wouldn't be able to hold out for long.

She sucked him like a starving woman, her enthusiasm hypnotic. One of her hands curled around his shaft as the other continued to massage his balls.

Oh fuck.

He was going to come hard. His fingers tightened in her hair and he exploded in her mouth without warning. "Damn!" She never pulled back as he spewed his cum down her throat. "Ah!" Raw pleasure grasped and held him.

His vision blurred and everything around him disappeared. All he knew was soul-shattering ecstasy as she allowed his cum to fill her.

After she swallowed everything he had, he slowly returned to reality. His body untensed and his cock slipped from her mouth. She sat back as he collapsed on the mat. He wasn't sure if it was the situation with others watching or part of the injection Leila had given him, but it felt as if Brianna had completely drained him and sexually satisfied him more than he could ever remember being.

Their first time together had been powerful. She'd satisfied him physically and emotionally. But this time had been pure, animalistic pleasure. He'd needed to come so bad and she'd done exactly what he craved. There was just something very primitive about watching a woman—especially a strong, independent woman—on the ground, sucking and swallowing cum without hesitation.

She whispered in his ear. "Roll onto your stomach, Sam."

"Mmm." Lazily he rolled over and pulled a pillow into his arms, resting his cheek on the softness. At this point, he'd do anything she asked. He'd been told it would be hard for him to remain sexually satisfied after the chemicals got into his body but right now he felt quite content and in need of a nap.

Brianna wiped her mouth, then motioned for Josella to get the equipment needed for the next step. The young woman rose and walked over to a table in the corner of the room. Brianna saw the Initiation case when Josella pushed aside one of the sheets.

Josella opened the case and took out a long, thin dildo. After examining it briefly, she brought it over. Brianna took it from her and tested the object to make sure the feelers extended and were moist. Sam needed to be protected anally. She hoped he wouldn't protest, for this was an essential part of the rite.

She shoved some pillows under his hips. His eyes cracked open, then widened considerably when he noticed Josella had come over and was kneeling beside him.

"Stay relaxed, Sam," Brianna told him in a low voice, knowing he hadn't expected Josella to become involved at this point. But she needed help for she knew he would be hesitant about this part of the Initiation.

His eyes locked on the dildo in her hand and he rolled to the side. He grabbed her wrist. "We're skipping that part."

"We can't skip this part. It's integral." She gently touched his forehead with her other hand. "It will be all right."

Leila's voice came on over the speakers. "Sam, think of it as nothing more than a medical procedure if that makes you feel better."

"It doesn't." After looking around the room, as if searching for a way out, he lowered his voice. "I'm not happy about this. And just when I was enjoying myself. Don't ruin it, Brianna." He looked up at her.

The emotion in his eyes almost undid her—a combination of anger, disappointment, frustration and uncertainty. He appeared, well, more vulnerable than she'd ever seen him. The total change of atmosphere in the room was not good and threatened the success of the Initiation. Still, she wouldn't use force on him. Ultimately, he'd have to allow this or she'd stop.

"Do it, Brianna," Laszlo ordered over the speakers.

Brianna leaned over and licked at his ear. "It'll feel good if you don't fight it. I promise." She imagined it wasn't easy on him to have others watch him endure

something he opposed, especially something sexual. She motioned to Josella. "Massage his butt."

Josella looked a little nervous as she reached out to touch him. Brianna understood her feelings. If Sam was going to resist them on anything, it would be this. Everything else wasn't a problem.

The shot Leila gave him could make him more pliant but it could also do the opposite and make him more aggressive and stubborn to have his way. She'd hope for the former.

Brianna grazed his ear with her tongue, trying to keep him distracted. She stroked his hair in a slow, gentle rhythm. "Just think of sex – raw, primitive sex – nothing else."

For the protective elements to take effect in his system correctly, he needed to come while they fucked him in the ass, so she had to make sure he was sufficiently stimulated. "Spread his ass cheeks."

As Josella slowly spread his cheeks, Brianna saw Sam stiffen but he didn't say anything. "It's all right. Stay relaxed."

He grunted.

She watched Josella squeeze his cheeks, doing her best to ease his discomfort. Still, worry rolled through her. There had to be a way to help him. An idea popped into her head. Yes. Something to help him more easily enjoy this submissive position which made him so uncomfortable.

She wasn't familiar with the nervous systems of Earth males but they couldn't be too much different than Xylon males, given their sexual organs were almost identical. They seemed to respond to the same type of stimulation. She leaned toward Josella and whispered in her ear.

At her suggestion, Josella's eyes widened. The young woman looked down at Sam's ass and chewed at her bottom lip. When she looked back up, she released her lip and nodded.

Brianna set down the dildo. She leaned over and covered Sam's mouth with her own. He responded immediately by raising up onto his elbows. At the better angle, he pushed his tongue into her mouth, sliding it along her tongue in a slow glide.

Sam kissed Brianna deeply, enjoying the taste of her. Every intimate part of this woman held a unique flavor that he couldn't get enough of. He wanted her again. He needed to get his cock inside her and fuck her like crazy.

He jerked. What? He felt something wet. He felt...

Damn! Josella's tongue was pushing into his asshole. A lightning bolt of pleasure crackled through him. He groaned into Brianna's mouth. His cock pushed against the pillows beneath him.

In his current position, he'd tightened his ass. Once Josella forced her tongue inside him, his position helped her find every nerve. His hole gripped her tongue all the way around.

Brianna pulled away, breaking their heated kiss.

He groaned again and hung his head. "Ah, yeah, Josella. Get deeper. Yes!"

Brianna guided his mouth down to her breasts. He eagerly took one of her nipples into his mouth and sucked hard and fast. He was going to come any second.

When he didn't think he could hold out any longer, Josella's tongue left him. *No!* He moaned in disappointment and released Brianna's nipple. "Don't stop now. I almost came." Then he felt it. The first penetration of the dildo. He immediately stiffened.

Brianna shifted and her hand burrowed beneath him, trying to touch his cock. Or so he assumed. Josella must be the one working the dildo.

"Get up on your knees, Sam, so we can push it in," Brianna said.

He automatically followed her instructions.

Not to be compliant as she might think. Though he'd enjoyed Josella's tongue tremendously, getting fucked in the ass with a fake cock was not happening. Now that he had some leverage, he would pull away and take back control.

Before he moved, Brianna's hand circled his shaft. At the same time something long and slim—the dildo—slid deeply into his ass. "Ahh...oh...fuck." The feeling was incredible and all thoughts of getting away suddenly left his head. He'd never imagined it would feel so good.

"Look at me," Brianna coached.

Their eyes met. The sexy look on her face enticed him. She smiled as if knowing exactly what he was feeling.

"Let go, Sam. Let it happen."

He hated to admit to the pleasure of the dildo in his ass. But it had made him hard as steel. He needed to come. At the same time, he wanted Brianna to come too. To share this moment with him. "I need to fuck you," he whispered coarsely. "Get beneath me."

Chapter Fifteen

Alexa yawned and stretched. The babies had woken up and needed changing and feeding, so she'd taken them one at a time into the supply room for privacy while Braden continued to view the videos. Just in case someone entered the room unannounced, she hadn't wanted to be out there half dressed and on display.

Now the little ones were lying quietly in makeshift cribs that Leila had set up for them, looking cuter than any babies she'd ever seen in her life. She couldn't help but smile.

She walked across the room and strolled up behind Braden. She rested her hands on his shoulders. "So who all went down to the sublevel? Do you have a list yet?"

"Just about everyone, except you, I think. Even Briggs, Josella and Delemar went down there."

"Why would they go down to the sublevel?"

"Briggs was probably nosing around. I'd do the same in an alien setting. Any good military officer would. It looked like Josella followed Delemar down there. I have no idea why. Or why he went down. You don't think they're doing the nasty together, do you? Meeting in secret?" He chuckled, looking over his shoulder at her.

She slapped his arm. "That's terrible." The idea of those two together sexually didn't form a pretty picture and she couldn't decide whether to laugh or cringe at the disturbing image that formed in her head. Although it had given her an idea of her own. She rubbed her breasts against the man in front of her.

"Are you doing that on purpose?" Braden growled.

"Mmm, hmm."

"Are you really ready to entice me so blatantly, my love? What did Leila say? Did you talk to her about us being intimate again?"

"The last time she examined me, she said I was fine and sex would be all right. With my healing elements, courtesy of my own Initiation, I'm ready a lot sooner than I normally would have been. And you need a break."

He swiveled in the chair and pulled her between his legs. "A break, huh? It needs to be a fast one. Finding our traitor is top priority. I've shut down all the external comm channels, so no more messages can go out. They'll end up scrambled and a copy of the original will forward to the control room. But I don't like the idea of whoever betrayed us having free rein to run around down here and cause problems at will."

"Fast works for me. Just to take the edge off. You'll think clearer afterward."

"I like the sound of that." He tugged at her pants. "Maybe I should make it an official order for all Warriors. At least one fuck a day to keep the mind sharp."

She chuckled and covered his hands. "Not here. In the supply room."

"No, here." His eyes locked with hers. "Out in the open. It's more exciting."

She glanced at the open door, her heart pounding. Feeling him loosening her clothes, she looked back down as he lowered the pants to her knees. More exciting. Yes. The possibility of discovery did heighten her senses. Every nerve in her body tingled in expectation.

"Turn around. Face the door, so if anyone comes in they'll see the sexual pleasure on your face."

Slowly, she turned her back to him. Her pulse raced as her eyes fixed on the doorway, hoping nobody would come in, but at the same time, feeling excited by the possibility.

Braden's hand smacked against her ass. Alexa gasped and jerked. She'd always had a spanking fetish and Braden enjoyed indulging her as much as she needed. She loved him so much for that. She always came a lot harder after being spanked.

Roughly, he pulled at the ties on the sides of her underwear and ripped them off. She mewled, her sexual need peaking. The cooler air of the room wafted across her now bared pussy and ass.

He smacked her butt again. The sharp sound filled the room.

The feeling of his warm hand against her bare skin was incredible. "Harder, Braden." A third spank sent a distinct sting and wave of heat through her. She whimpered. Not in pain but in need.

When he didn't smack her again, she glanced behind her. She saw him freeing his very sizeable cock from his uniform. *Yes, yes, yes.*

He grasped her hips and pulled her down to the chair on top of him. Her pants fell to her ankles. His cock eased into her wet pussy one slow inch at a time. She moaned her pleasure, taking his full length.

Braden wrapped one arm around her waist and fucked her slowly, pushing his hips up against her.

She gripped the armrests of the chair. "Harder."

"I know you like everything hard. So do I. Don't tempt me."

"Hard. Fast. Please." She bounced atop him. "I need it."

A savage growl erupted from his throat. "Alexa..."

"Do it, Braden!"

"Ah hell." He tightened his arm around her. "You asked for it." He pumped his cock up into her, increasing the pace until he was grunting and fucking her wildly.

"Yes!" she screamed. "Oh yes!"

"Come. Now!"

At his command, she came. Her pussy clenched his thick cock and her cream soaked him.

"Yeah, Alexa. More." He reached down and rubbed her clit. "Again! Come!"

"Ah!" A second orgasm shot through her and she slammed her hips down against his cock. Her body always responded to his sexual commands, something she'd never experienced before with any other man. She'd never even known such a thing was possible. It fascinated her and made sex with him phenomenal. For them both.

When he pinched her clit, her body bowed and another climax exploded inside her.

He whispered in her ear, "Erik's coming. I can hear him." He rubbed her clit harder and faster. "Come again. Let him see."

She couldn't stop herself. She screamed and came so hard that she thought she'd pass out.

"Oh fuck!" Braden stiffened and climaxed, shooting his cum into her.

She groaned at the incredible feeling. Her breath came out in short pants. *So good.* Wave after wave of ecstasy rolled through her until his cock was no longer hard inside her. Only then did the pleasure ebb.

They both collapsed in the chair.

As her senses returned to normal, she realized that nobody had come into the room. He'd only been teasing her. Her head jerked toward the babies. They were in the back of the room and looked to be still and sounded quiet. They must have fallen asleep again. Thank goodness.

Braden held her protectively. "I hadn't planned to be so rough with you. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She rubbed his arm. A fast, hard fuck had been just what she'd needed to ease the stress. "You know I love it. Every time."

"As do I, my love. Though I prefer a much longer session." He nuzzled her neck.

"Me too." Braden enjoyed torturing her sexually. Not painful torture. He loved to stimulate her until she was out of her mind and in total need of sexual satisfaction any way she could get it. And any way he wanted her to do it.

"Soon."

Her pulse leapt at the thought. "I'm looking forward to it." She and Braden had been through a lot together but had come out stronger for it. No other man came close to him in her heart.

"What would you have done if Erik had come into the room?" he whispered against her ear.

"If anyone came in—"

"Not anyone. Erik."

"I, um, I don't know," she answered in a quiet and truthful voice. Ever since her Initiation, there had been an unusual connection among her, Braden and Erik.

"Would you still have come for me while he watched?" he rumbled.

A heightened sexual vibe filled the room once more and his cock stirred, though she doubted he'd get fully hard again so soon. Even a Xylon male needed time unless participating in an Initiation and affected by the chemicals.

"Hmm?" he prodded.

"Probably." Their strange physical and emotional connection had concerned her enough that she'd spoken to Kam about it, wondering if it was normal because of the rite they'd been through together. She also had wondered if Braden felt the same connection to Leila, given his part in her re-Initiation.

Kam told her that no such connection existed between Leila and Braden. Her brother had also told her that the connection among her, Braden and Erik was because of her Super-breeder status, her Initiation, the Branding and the now-defunct Xylon requirement for multi-breeders in such cases. He hadn't elaborated much beyond that. She remembered Braden mentioning to her once that his mother had been expected to multi-breed. She'd refused and ultimately had taken her own life. So incredibly sad.

Early in their relationship, before Erik was mated to Leila, he had watched her and Braden fuck numerous times. After their Branding ceremony, nothing more had happened with the three of them but their connection remained strong.

Regardless, she loved Braden with all her heart. Erik loved Leila. And that would never change, for they were predestined mates.

Still, she suspected there was more to the Super-breeder program than anyone was willing to say for one reason or another. Xylon and its people held many secrets. Secrets that usually hid their society's darker side. With the planet's destruction though, she doubted any of that really mattered anymore.

Braden lightly rubbed her pussy and swiveled them back toward the computer. "Son of a bitch!" His arms fell from around her.

Alexa jumped. "What?" She moved off his lap and looked around.

"The video." He quickly fastened his pants.

She pulled up her own pants and glanced briefly at the screen. "What about it?" She noticed that he'd forgotten to pause it. Now they'd have to find the spot where they'd left off.

"Let me run it back. I'll put it on normal time. I saw something. Yeah. Here. Look at this. This was when we all were in the big meeting."

Alexa stared at the screen, paying close attention. Briggs was sitting outside the conference room. She watched him reach down to his boot and do something to the heel. Some small object appeared in his hand. What the hell? She saw him manipulate the thing, then raise it to his mouth and begin speaking. The video had no sound so she couldn't tell what he was saying. "Is there audio?"

"Not that I could get working."

"Is he talking into a communication device?"

"Sure looks like it to me." He flipped a switch. "Erik, Torque, Pitch. I need you in medical. Now."

Alexa's heart sank, thinking one of her own might have betrayed them. "We don't know, Braden."

"It's right there." He came out of the chair, pointing at the screen. "If he's not the traitor, why didn't he tell us about the device? There's no reason to keep something like that a secret if he's on our side."

"He's military. You all keep secrets. No matter what planet you're from or what the situation. Full disclosure isn't in a soldier's vocabulary, especially when it comes to working with outsiders."

"You're making a generalization, Alexa. All soldiers and all military operations on all planets are not the same."

"I know that, but —"

"We're supposed to be in alliance."

"Maybe it's not even a comm device but a recorder. How would he know Frost or know how to contact her anyway?"

"I sure as hell intend to find out." Braden scrubbed a hand down his face in obvious frustration. "He better have some good answers or I'll kill the bastard with my own hands. Fuck!"

Alexa's eyes widened and her heart raced. Worry consumed her. "I've never seen you like this, Braden." The glow in his eyes scared her. In this state, no telling what he might be capable of.

"If he's guilty, that means he told Frost where we are, Alexa. If she gets to us, she will kill us or turn us into slaves, the babies included. I know her. She's a vicious bitch and won't care about your Super-breeder status. Don't let the fact that Briggs is human cloud your judgment. If he's put my family in danger, all of us in danger, he will pay."

She knew Braden was right but she still had a hard time accepting the possibility that Briggs might have betrayed them. She wanted to believe that an Earth Air Force Officer would have a stronger sense of loyalty and duty, especially since they were in the process of trying to save his planet. Her planet.

The only positive side about any of this would be that Halah and Kam would finally be proven innocent if Briggs was guilty. Still, she hoped for another explanation all the way around.

* * * * *

Brianna's head snapped up when the doors to the conference room slid open. Josella looked over as well. Sam didn't seem to notice. Or if he had, he didn't respond to the intrusion.

Leila entered. "Don't stop," she told them. The doors whooshed closed behind her. "I need to get the sample when he comes this time. Keep your hand on his cock. I don't want him fucking you with it, Brianna, until I get his sperm."

Sam made a sound of disappointment. "You ladies are torturing me. Three hot women in the room and now you say I can't fuck any of you."

Leila chuckled. "Sorry, Sam. After I get the sample, you can go crazy with Brianna and Josella. Have you extended the feelers?"

"Not yet," Brianna answered.

"Go ahead and do that, Josella. They need to coat him internally before he climaxes. Don't come yet, Sam."

He made some sort of gurgling sound but didn't protest or try to pull away.

Given the chemicals in Sam and his sexual needs, his actions could quickly become unpredictable. Brianna stayed on alert, ready to move defensively if she had to.

As a Class 1 Warrior, she had a lot more war training than Leila. But between the two of them, there shouldn't be too much of a problem handling him.

If Sam made a move to grab Leila for sexual purposes, she would have to stop him so he wouldn't be poisoned. Having Leila in the room at all during this process was definitely dangerous but she was the only one who could obtain the sample and assure it wouldn't get contaminated.

Well, actually, Laszlo could have done it. He was a Healer too and would know proper procedure. But Sam probably would not have been able to climax in that situation, which would have guaranteed failure.

Leila knelt beside him. "Ignore me."

"Not possible." He turned his head toward her. "You smell too good. I would love to lick—ah, hell." He jerked. "What are those?"

"The feelers, Sam," Josella said.

Brianna slowly stroked his cock, discounting his words to Leila. His sexual needs were peaking and he wasn't himself. He needed to fuck and any available pussy would attract him. Not that Leila wasn't gorgeous. But in his right mind, she doubted Sam would go after her.

"Ah...damn." His body jerked again. "Those things are going to drive me...ah...ah...over the edge."

Though they needed him to come, they had to be careful in stimulating him so he didn't come too soon. For the sample to be viable, all the chemicals inside his body needed to be working at the same time.

"He has to gush so we get enough," Leila said. "Josella, lean down behind him and lick his balls."

"Oh yeah," Sam replied in obvious agreement. "Lick 'em...ah, good!"

Brianna had never felt his cock so hard. He must be suffering intense sexual need. She took over handling the dildo, pumping the object into his ass in a steady rhythm now.

"Ah, fuck me hard. Yes!"

Brianna smiled. Sam's body shook. From the ass fucking, Josella's licking or both, she didn't know. And it didn't matter. As long as, when he came, it felt good and he gave Leila the sample she needed.

"Faster." The word came out of him as a whoosh of air. "Go deeper, Brianna."

She plunged the dildo deeper into his ass, fucking him as hard as she could now. There was a good possibility that Sam wouldn't even remember most of this, which might be best. From what Brianna understood, Alexa's memories of her Initiation were spotty. At least at first. A side effect of the chemicals and brain changes. She'd remembered more later, supposedly, but Brianna didn't know how much. Xylons also sometimes experienced memory lapses during the rite but it was more common with those who weren't full-blooded Xylon.

"Remove your hand," Leila told her. "I need access."

"I need to come."

"Go ahead, Sam," Leila said. "I'm ready."

Brianna glanced beneath Sam and saw that Leila had ensconced his cock with some sort of semi-hard sheath. To catch his cum. Leila's fingers held it in place around the base. She thought Leila might be massaging him a little with some of her fingers but she wasn't certain.

Brianna turned on the vibration device of the dildo. It would be unexpected and should send him over the edge.

"Ahhh...damn." Sam pumped his hips. She fucked his ass faster and he began breathing hard and groaning. "Yeah, yeah, yeah." He shouted something unintelligible.

"He's coming," Leila said.

"Oh fuck!" Sam's hands clenched into fists. His whole body stiffened. "Ah, ah, ah...yeah!" He let out a long, guttural moan. "Fuck my ass good!" His body jerked a couple of times. "Oh...oh..." He started to collapse.

"No, Sam! Stay up on your knees," Leila warned. "I need to get this sheath off you."

Brianna slid her free arm under his stomach to help him. His forehead pressed against the pillows on the floor in front of him.

"All right," Leila said. "I got it." She wiped her hand on her uniform, holding the sheath with the other one. She pressed a small button on the side of the silver-colored device and a panel slid closed over the top. "This will be perfect. He overflowed it. I'll have plenty to work with."

"How do we know the chemicals worked inside him?" Josella asked.

Before Brianna realized what was happening, Leila pulled out a knife from her boot and sliced Sam's arm.

"Son of a bitch!" He jerked, his gaze snapped to Leila.

Brianna gasped and Josella froze.

"Sorry, Sam. But look," Leila pointed at his arm, "you're healing."

"Son of a bitch," he repeated, in a lower voice this time while staring at the wound.

Brianna smiled. He was barely even bleeding. The cut, already repairing itself at a rapid rate, gradually turned from red to pink. The Initiation had worked. All three women moved away and Sam collapsed to his stomach.

* * * * *

Alexa paced, waiting for the others to arrive. This was not good. This was not good at all. Braden's anger and impatience had peaked. She'd given him a wide berth since he found the video of Briggs. She knew when he needed space to think.

Torque entered the room in a rush. "What's going on? Is everyone all right?"

He looked around. His gaze fell on her, then his brother. When he'd heard the call to medical, the seriousness of Braden's voice, he'd probably feared the worst. She could see the concern in his eyes.

Erik and Pitch entered almost on his heels. "We're here," Erik said, a little out of breath. "What's happening?"

"We found something. Take a look." Braden flipped a switch and ran the video on the screen.

"Fuck!" Torque spat, his eyes fixated on the screen. "That lying bastard."

"We also found video of him going down to the sublevel multiple times. I can't believe we were taken in by him."

"We're going to confront him, right?" Pitch asked in a low voice, his jaw and eyes looking hard as ice.

"Now," Erik said. "While he's in the conference room. He'll be useless to defend himself, physically and mentally, while under the influence of the Initiation chemicals."

"Wait," Alexa stepped forward. "Don't just jump on him. Give him a chance to explain." She still didn't want to believe that Briggs was working against them.

"Alexa, let us handle this." Braden looked at Erik, determination in his eyes. "You're in charge of this. I'm not leaving Alexa and the babies until I'm assured they're safe from Frost."

"No problem. I'll take care of Briggs. He'll tell us the truth, one way or the other. Let's go, guys." He headed into the corridor. Torque and Pitch followed him.

Worry gripped Alexa. They were acting like a lynch mob. She turned back toward the computer. "Can we watch what happens? In the conference room and the observation room where Laszlo is?"

Braden stared out the door for a long while before answering. He finally turned to her. "Partly." He sat in front of the computer and punched up a vid-monitor screen.

"There's no monitor in the observation room. But we can watch the confrontation in the conference room. We won't know Laszlo's response unless he also enters the conference room. But I'm sure he will."

"Is there sound while we're watching it live?"

"Yeah, just a minute. All right. It's on."

Alexa saw Briggs lying naked, facedown, on some pillows. Brianna sat nearby. Also naked. Alexa couldn't see Josella. The hanging sheets were obscuring part of the view. Nobody was speaking but she could hear some rustling and other small sounds. She felt like a voyeur.

Braden wasn't looking at the screen but seemed deep in thought. She sat beside him, certain he wanted to be there confronting Briggs himself. If the Colonel was indeed proven guilty, she knew Braden would confront him at some point. "I really hope there's an explanation for this."

He raised his eyes and his gaze locked with hers. "Briggs is the only stranger among us. At least it would prove that none of us has turned against our own kind. That's a good thing, Alexa."

"I suppose. But Briggs is *my* own kind."

"Only half."

"It's the only half I knew until you came along. I'll always hold a soft spot in my heart for Earth."

Plus, if true, if Briggs actually was the traitor, she worried how it would affect Brianna, who had grown close to him since all this began. To be betrayed by a man she'd developed feelings for would be devastating, especially on the heels of losing her sister and her home planet. Alexa couldn't imagine the heartache that would cause.

She pulled in a deep breath and tugged at the collar of her shirt. She'd been having trouble breathing lately. The air was definitely getting thinner down here. And everyone was acting more than a bit out of character in her opinion.

They needed to get out of here and to safety. Soon. Before the babies were affected. And before someone snapped.

Chapter Sixteen

Erik and the others stormed the conference room. Erik had reeled in his baser instincts and ordered Pitch and Torque to do the same. They couldn't allow themselves to get caught up in the emotion of the situation. Doing something stupid wouldn't help their cause. It would only serve to divide their group even more than it already was.

As they rushed in, Erik heard Josella gasp. His gaze shifted from her and fell on Brianna. She frowned at him. A twinge of regret pricked at his conscience but any apology he might have wanted to issue stuck in his throat. He was too angry at Briggs and the situation for niceties.

Everything and everyone came to a stop. Brianna reached for a sheet to cover her body. After an awkward moment, they all snapped back into motion.

"We're here on business," Erik announced.

Briggs rolled over and sat up on a mat, not bothering to cover himself. "What business?"

Erik walked over to him, and despite the fact that Briggs was naked and looked half out of it, he jerked him up by the arm. "On your feet. Now."

"Hey, hey, hey." Briggs wobbled a little but then found his balance. "Easy."

"Can't this wait, whatever it is?" Brianna demanded, pushing to her feet and tucking the corner of the sheet between her breasts, covering her body. "We still need to get through the last stage of the rite."

Laszlo stomped into the room. "What the hell is going on? Explain your actions. Now!"

"Where the fuck is it?" Torque asked looking around. He headed for Briggs' clothing.

Pitch followed him.

"Someone answer me," Laszlo ordered.

"Where's Leila?" Erik asked.

"She went to medical to process the sperm sample," Brianna told him. "We got it. The Initiation worked. But we're far from finished in here."

They must have missed each other in the cross-corridor, Erik thought. Just as well that Leila wasn't in the middle of this. He walked over to Torque and Pitch. "It's the left boot."

"Yeah, I know." Torque picked it up. It only took him a second to figure out how to open the heel. He pulled out the comm device and handed it to Erik.

"Rhodes!" Laszlo demanded.

Erik turned toward him. "Briggs has a transmitter and used it to alert Frost of our location."

"No." Brianna stepped protectively in front of Briggs, a shocked expression on her face. "That's impossible."

"It's right here." He held up the device so she could see it. "We have him using it on video right outside this room. We also have him on video going down to the sublevel more than once. A message to Frost was found on the sublevel computer."

"The sublevel?" Josella asked.

Brianna whirled to face Briggs. "Did you contact Frost with that device?"

"Who?"

Laszlo shook his head. "Impossible. Do you know for a fact that he was in contact with Frost and gave her our location?"

"It had to be him," Torque said. "The transmission is a fact. I saw the connection myself. Braden saw it. Halah saw it. Right on the sublevel computer. FSMF-36. Her ship's identification. The only way to get a transmission through would be with the help of an independent comm device. Just like that one." Torque pointed to the transmitter. "He was keeping the device hidden in his boot, which makes it obvious he's been up to no good with it, otherwise he'd have disclosed its existence. Even if he didn't tell Frost where we are, it's probable she could track the location once contact was made."

Briggs grabbed a sheet, looking a little more coherent. "Yes. The device is mine." He wrapped the sheet around his waist. "It's one-way only. To send messages back to Earth. I didn't tell anyone about it because I didn't want it confiscated. That's all I used it for."

"He's lying," Torque growled.

"Why should we believe you?" Erik question.

"Wait," Josella said.

"I believe him," Brianna said.

"Stop thinking with your pussy, sister," Torque barked.

Brianna shoved him back. "Don't talk to me like I'm an imbecile."

"Hey!" Torque wobbled backward before planting his feet. Surprise filled his face, then a glare lit his eyes.

"Enough!" Laszlo ordered. "I will not have in-fighting."

"Listen to me!" Josella shouted, pushing her way into the group. "I saw someone using the sublevel computer. I saw those letters and numbers on the screen but I didn't know what they meant."

"Who did you see, Josella?" Pitch asked.

Silence fell in the room. Everyone looked at her with interest.

"Delemar."

A tense silence surrounded them.

"Delemar? That's crazy," Brianna finally said, shaking her head.

"Maybe not," Torque mumbled, a formidable look on his face.

Brianna looked at him. "I mean, it's not crazy that he might have been sitting and doing something at the computer. It's crazy that he'd be in contact with Frost." She turned to Josella. "Are you sure those are the letters you saw? Delemar's a Xylon Council member. He knows—"

"Everything." Erik felt his face burning with anger. The truth hit him like the blast from a surge-rifle. "Delemar knows everything about Xylon. He has top clearance. Which would explain how Daegal knew so much all the time. Delemar could have been informing Daegal, along with others of high rank on Marid, of every move we've been making for who knows how long."

"Shit," Torque spat. "Tara died because of that bastard."

"Would he do that?" Pitch questioned. "Betray Xylon?"

"Why would he betray his own people?" Josella asked.

"Wealth. Power. Revenge. Who knows?" Laszlo answered, sounding weary. "I should have suspected this. Seen it somehow. He must be found. Put Halah on it," he ordered Erik with a pointed look, then glanced around. "Where's Braden?" Laszlo made eye contact with him again. "He should be here."

Erik returned his look. "Braden stayed with Alexa and the babies in medical to make sure they were safe. Frost and the Egesa could be here at any time if she does know where we are."

Had Delemar discovered the babies were the next Triad of Power and told Frost that too? If so, the danger to them would be even greater. He was certain that worry lay heavily on Braden's mind. Delemar needed to be questioned.

"Braden's the one who found the video?" Laszlo asked.

Erik nodded. He didn't tell Laszlo about locking up Kam and Halah. He didn't see the point of causing more tension. He'd order them freed immediately, now that he knew the truth.

Halah would handle Delemar well. Her electrical powers worked a lot like a pain inducer but were much more potent. Her equipment was built into her Warrior jacket, but even without it, she always retained some power on her own.

And she was more objective.

Any of the other Warriors, including himself, would probably lose control and just kill Delemar to be done with it. Especially Torque.

"I'll assign Halah," Erik agreed. "It'll be done immediately."

Pitch glanced at Briggs. "I think he needs some relief. His eyes are glazing over."

Brianna touched his arm and concern filled her gaze. "Everyone out except Josella," she ordered. "We must continue before his brain is damaged."

"Pitch, stay behind," Laszlo said. "We might need you."

Erik didn't object. They'd finished with the ships. He needed to get on the oxygen problem. With Halah on Delemar, Torque working on decon and the power problem, and Braden protecting Alexa and the babies, they were covered.

With nods all around, everyone headed for their assignments.

Once they stepped out in the corridor and Laszlo and Pitch disappeared inside the observation room, Erik turned to Torque. The look in the man's eyes worried him. "Don't do anything stupid, Torque."

A grunt was his only response.

"I'm serious. Release Halah and Kam. Let them know what's going on and put them both on the search for Delemar. Kam may be able to sense where he's hiding. I'm going to report to Braden, then I'll look into the oxygen problem. Is that decon room set if we need it?"

"It's done."

"Great. The ships are ready too. Once this Initiation is done and Leila gets what she needs processed, we'll be good to go. With luck we'll be out of here and have sent back armed rescue ships before any unwelcome visitors arrive. Since you're done with decon, concentrate on the power drain. See if you can get that stopped so it doesn't fuck us up later."

Torque nodded but it looked forced.

"Torque..."

"I know my damn duty."

"See that you do." Erik hoped Torque didn't cause trouble. They already had enough to deal with. "Let's go."

He had such a bad feeling about all this. How had they not seen that a Council member could be the traitor? Delemar was one person they should have suspected because he had access to all of Xylon's information. They had been so concentrated on blaming Laszlo or Kam or Halah that none of them had seen what was right in front of their eyes.

Delemar had probably even maneuvered his own rescue. Put himself in the right place at the right time to be saved. Or at least given himself an advantage. Tara could just as easily have been the one who had materialized down here. But Delemar had played the odds and won.

He suspected the man probably had been transferring information to Daegal and his people for a very long time, which meant the Egesa held a great advantage over them. Daegal had always been privy to more information than he should from Warriors who had turned to serve him as Agents. But as a Xylon Council member, Delemar could supply the most sensitive of information. He might even have known about Daegal's invasion plans and played a part in Xylon's destruction.

If so, the bastard deserved nothing less than a slow and torturous death.

* * * * *

Halah let out a whoop. "I found the files. Everything. It's all here. Well, not everything. But enough to help us out where we need it to get out of this shelter in one piece."

Kam came up behind her as she worked at Laszlo's computer. "So who's the traitor?"

She felt his tension, heard the frustration in his voice and hated to disappoint him. Unfortunately *who* was still the one missing link. She looked up at him. "I don't know."

He scowled and mumbled something incoherent.

"But look. The person did make a log of the transmissions after all—at least some of them. They were saved in a folder outside the log directory, which was why they didn't pop up when Torque ran a normal log search. They include the instructions on how to sabotage the ships, the oxygen and even the power down here. Which is probably why the person saved them. To refer back to. With this information, we know exactly what was done and where. We can reverse everything." She smiled up at him.

"So it *was* sabotage. All of it." He let out a heavy breath. "All right. Let's get on it and get things repaired as quickly as possible."

"We should tell the others."

"Let's fix what problems we can first, starting with the oxygen. Once they discover we've escaped, they might not be keen on listening to anything we have to say. Not right away anyhow and we have a time factor to consider."

"Good point. Though to fix the oxygen, we'll need to go down to the sublevel. We might run into someone down there."

"With a little luck, I think we'll be able to sneak by. Especially if whoever is down there is working on the orbiters. They'll be in the docking areas or inside one of the ships. I should be able to sense if anyone comes near. Although that blasted machinery down there puts out some wicked interference." A frown crossed his face.

"I trust in your abilities." She smiled, knowing that his sensing power had been growing. At least until they'd gotten down here. She didn't know the reason for his stronger senses nor why they had suddenly waned. Such powers normally did not cycle, as far as she knew. Neither of them could figure out the changes happening inside him. Her brow furrowed as her thoughts returned to the traitor. With what she'd found in the files, they should be able to figure out who had betrayed them.

"What is it?"

"I was thinking... There are only three people down here who would have needed instructions from Frost to carry out this sabotage. The rest would already have enough knowledge to cause plenty of destruction."

"Four," Kam corrected after only a slight hesitation. "Alexa, Delemar, Briggs, Josella. None of them would know how to sabotage the systems without help."

"Delemar doesn't have the knowledge?"

"His background is in social sciences. He was never a Warrior, as far as I know, only an advisor. The Council brought him in after one of the uprisings to help reestablish order."

"I see. I never did follow the political side of Xylon that much. Especially after the Council refused to help me." The memory of how they'd turned their backs on her and her sister still burned strong. When Kam touched her shoulder, she gave him a shaky smile. "Well, we can discount Josella as the traitor."

"And Alexa."

"So that leaves Briggs or Delemar. Who do you think?" she asked.

"I never sensed anything of that caliber from Briggs. Delemar hasn't been around enough for me to gauge him. Even before all this happened, I was never in his presence much. I can't really say."

"You can sense something like that? Betrayal?"

"Sometimes. It depends on the person and the level of emotion attached. In this instance though, it's a toss up." He rubbed his temple.

"Headache?"

"It's not bad."

She wasn't so certain, from the look in his eyes. She feared his physical problems were affecting him mentally and probably making his sensing ability not as effective. Maybe that was even the full cause of his waning abilities instead of any external force. That worried her for they needed him at full strength. *She* needed him—in so many ways.

She got out of the chair and pressed her fingers to his temple, giving him a little shock. "You think Delemar would betray his own people?" A stupid question actually, given the fact that more than one Warrior had turned against Xylon over the years. Why wouldn't a civilian? She had just figured, or hoped, that a Council member would be above corruption. But then if the incentive was attractive enough...

"Everyone has a price." Kam groaned and his whole body seemed to relax. "Thanks." He kissed her lightly on the lips.

She stroked his cheek. "Yes, a price." Precisely what she had been thinking. She knew about that only too well. Her price had been the safety of her sister. Though she now regretted how she'd gone about securing Josella's safety. She should have found a better way. All this suspicion surrounding them wouldn't be as acute if she'd followed a different path in her life. But she couldn't change the past. All she could do was choose better in the future. "You ready to go?"

He nodded. "I'm feeling better."

"Good. I'm going to leave these files up on the screen. If Laszlo returns, he'll see them right away. I'm sure he'll come to the same conclusion as we did. He'll know we're innocent."

“He’s not the one who thinks we’re guilty of anything. Still, it’s a good idea. It’ll be proof for the others. Lock it in so the files can’t be erased and let’s go.”

Chapter Seventeen

Sam tried to push aside the accusations of the male Warriors but his confrontation with them kept replaying in his mind. Thank goodness for Josella or no telling what would have happened. They might have killed him, given their anger and his vulnerability, or imprisoned him and even refused to help his planet defeat the Egesa.

And it would have been his fault.

All because of his deception and accusations he had no way of proving false. Guilt pressed him hard over what he'd done. He shouldn't have kept the transmitter a secret. Erik had confiscated it as he'd feared but if he'd been honest from the beginning, it might never have happened.

His orders had been clear though. No disclosure. And he'd followed his orders. Still, he should have at least told Brianna. She had deserved the truth from him.

He pulled her into his arms and she willingly came, stroking his shoulders. Though fucking her was foremost on his mind, he couldn't help remembering her actions in front of her people and feeling pleased. She'd come to his defense.

But she had also questioned him, just as her training dictated. The woman versus the military officer. The woman had taken precedence. He loved her for that. *Yes. Love.* For that and for so much more. Burying his feelings wasn't something he wanted to do any longer.

Unfortunately, even though Josella had cleared him and Brianna believed in him, he felt the others would now be looking at him with suspicion since he hadn't been forthcoming about the transmitter. They would probably be wondering what else he could be keeping a secret. He squeezed Brianna's waist and their eyes met. He hoped his actions didn't cause problems for this woman who had done so much for him.

He would prove himself trustworthy to her and to the others. Somehow.

As the thought went through his head, a surge of lust hit him so hard that he winced. Damn! His body felt on fire. No matter how hard he fought to keep other thoughts in his head, his sexual needs were growing at too rapid a rate. That's all he should really be concentrating on at the moment. If he didn't fulfill his desires, he knew his brain would implode.

After stepping back a bit, he pulled the sheet from around Brianna and dropped the sheet he'd grabbed for himself, to the floor. He pulled her close again. Skin against skin. So much better.

When he saw Josella moving away, he turned his head. "No. Stay here with us."

She immediately looked to Brianna.

"Only for the Initiation. Remember that," Brianna told her. She fingered his chin, turning his head back until he met her gaze again. "After this, you're all mine."

He liked the sound of that and leaned in to cover her lips with his. He loved the possessive tone in her voice. He felt possessive too. He reached down and squeezed her ass. Still, Josella being right there next to them increased the sexual intensity.

Sam felt his cock growing harder. Those chemicals had done their job. Too well. He broke the kiss and stepped back.

Laszlo and Pitch must have left and gone to the observation room, for he didn't see them anywhere. He'd forgotten all about them when his body had gone into sex-starvation mode. He barely remembered Erik and Torque leaving.

He'd fought back the sexual cravings while the others were in the room. For the most part. But now the feelings were hitting him with such force that he couldn't deny them any longer. He wanted both women under his sexual control. "Get on your knees, Josella."

Again the young woman looked to Brianna.

"Stop looking at her for approval." He was in charge now. "Take off your clothes and get on your knees."

Josella hesitated only a moment, then hurried to follow his instructions. She pulled off her clothing, tossed it aside and dropped to her knees. She hunched slightly, partially covering her body.

Brianna cocked an eyebrow at him.

He chuckled at the look on her face—a cross between surprise and curiosity. He found that he liked being in sexual control of two women at the same time. One woman had his heart, the other was simply there to assist with his physical cravings if she was needed. The idea of both of them fulfilling him was a huge turn-on. His balls ached something fierce and he swore his cock was throbbing.

"You too, Brianna." He tenderly touched her cheek. "On your knees."

Brianna didn't protest any of Sam's words, though it surprised her how quickly he'd embraced the sexual freedom of the Initiation ceremony. After his brain function returned to normal, he would also return to normal and no longer crave two women. Well, no more than any man fantasized about such a thing.

But he wouldn't need two women for survival.

For now, he had to be sexually satisfied. Repeatedly. She wasn't certain she could do that without help, so she was grateful for Josella's presence. Sort of. The conflict inside her about sharing Sam sexually confused her more than it should, considering this was Xylon's way of life and something she was very familiar with.

She lowered to her knees, wondering at Sam's plans where Josella was concerned. Once she knew, she'd be all right, as long as Sam was all right and didn't suffer any mental or physical damage because of all this.

He wrapped his hand around the base of his cock. "Come here, Brianna. Slide those luscious lips over me and suck my cock like you're starving to taste *my* cum only. Watch her, Josella. I want your eyes on us at all times."

She did only want his cum and none other. She leaned forward and took the head of his swollen cock into her mouth. Big, but not impossible to manage, which made him perfect in her eyes. At his urging, she slid her lips over him farther, taking more, moving back and forth along his shaft. She loved the unique taste of him. She glanced up and saw him staring at Josella's breasts, the first real interest he'd shown in her body. An unexpected wave of jealousy hit her.

His gaze briefly returned to her. He smiled slightly as if knowing her thoughts, then his gaze again switched, once more concentrating on the young woman beside them. "Lie down and play with yourself."

"Play?"

Brianna hesitated, but only briefly, then she continued sucking. She felt like laughing at Josella's confusion. Sunevian translations were lacking apparently. Well, she wasn't about to explain. Sam would handle it. Besides, she had her mouth full.

"Sexually," he added in explanation. "Use your fingers."

"Oh." Understanding filled her voice. Josella lay back on the mat. One hand slid down her body toward her pussy. Sam's eyes followed the movement.

That's about all Brianna could see from her position. But she sensed Sam's breathing grow deeper. Good, he needed to climax again. And she craved the taste of his cum in her mouth.

"Play with your clit," he ordered, his voice sounding gruff. His muscles tensed.

Brianna had thought it wouldn't take much. She worried about the added stress on his body from watching Josella touch herself and her own sucking. He needed to come quickly to relieve the pressure in his brain. After such a long wait since his last climax, he had to be in pain. She reached up and gently massaged his balls.

"Ah. Yeah." Sam's hand slid into her hair. "Suck my dick faster, Brianna. Stronger. Yeah, like that. Oh, your lips feel great. Rub your clit harder for me, Josella. Open your legs wide. I want to see everything when you come."

Brianna heard Josella getting more and more excited. She took more of Sam's cock in her mouth as she bobbed her head, sucking hard. Certainly he was on the edge now.

"Come for us, Josella. You're so wet, so ready. Don't hold back. Fuck yourself until you scream."

Josella moaned and came, her body twitching in reaction. "Oh...ah! Yes!"

"Ah, that's right, baby. You're going to have me coming in a minute."

Brianna's clit ached. She needed to come too. In response to Josella's orgasm, Sam's fingers tightened in her hair. This was it. Brianna prepared to swallow his cum. But to her surprise, he pushed her away.

She looked up at him and concern filled her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." As he answered, his eyes never left Josella. "I just want something more. I want Josella to do something special. You did well. Come here." Sam eyed Josella closely as she scooted close. "Don't move, Brianna."

Brianna recognized the tone in his voice. The commanding nature. She'd heard it numerous times before, from other men, during Initiations, so she said nothing and just allowed Sam to control the situation in the way he needed.

"Use your hand to make me come. Make me come all over Brianna's gorgeous tits."

Brianna sucked in a sharp breath but didn't move.

Josella didn't hesitate. She wrapped her hand around his shaft and worked his cock like an expert. Brianna was impressed and knew it wouldn't take long for Sam to climax.

"Ah, that feels great. Pinch your nipples, Brianna," he ordered, his eyes finally meeting hers again.

She licked her fingers then played with her nipples, pinching and tugging on them.

"Harder. Make yourself squirm."

Brianna did as he wanted, really needing to come badly. She saw Sam's fingers curl into fists. He was close. She couldn't wait to feel his cock inside her pussy. She knew he'd need to come several times.

"Come on her," Josella said, moving her hand rapidly. "Right now."

Brianna dropped her hands to her sides.

Sam groaned and his cum shot out. "Ah, yeah...yeah."

Josella smiled. "Keep coming. Soak her."

Brianna watched his cum splatter onto her breasts. She lifted her hand and slid her finger across one nipple, then brought it to her mouth, tasting him on her tongue.

"Ah, fuck, that's sexy," he ground out. The last bit of his cum dropped onto the mat. "You taste it too, Josella."

Josella smiled and wiped some up with her fingers. Her tongue darted out for a taste. "Mmm. I've never tasted an Earth man's cum before." As her hand slid along his shaft, the contented smile on her face slowly faded. She looked at his cock. "He's still hard."

"That's normal," Brianna replied. She grabbed one of the sheets and wiped her chest, then the mat. "Has the pressure eased any, Sam?"

He didn't answer. Instead, a haze filled his eyes. From the strained look on his face and his lack of movement, the same haze had probably also filled his brain.

Josella pulled her hand from his cock. "Sam?"

"Fuck!" He growled and dropped to the mats between them. His eyes looked feral. With unexpected speed, he pushed Brianna flat and spread her thighs with his knees. "I need inside your cunt. Now!"

"Yes." She reached for him, holding tightly to his arms. She was ready for this. "Fuck me the way you need to."

He stared down at her body, then looked deeply into her eyes. Without another word, he thrust his cock inside her, pumping her pussy hard.

Josella gasped and started to ease away. Sam's hand shot out and he grabbed her ankle. "Stay. Watch us fuck." He leaned down and licked Brianna's nipple. "Hold her down, Josella – by her shoulders."

Brianna saw her move and Josella's hands pressed on her shoulders. Sam curled his fingers around her arms, then bit her nipple. Brianna jerked, but couldn't really move with them holding her.

Josella chuckled and tightened her hold. "Do it again. Harder."

Sam bit into the fleshy bud. Brianna shrieked at the pleasure and at the small pain. A compelling combination that almost had her coming. He soothed the bite with several swipes of his tongue.

"Do you like a hard fucking too, Josella? This one does. Don't you, Brianna?" He thrust his hips forward.

"Ah! Yes!" Brianna wrapped her legs around him and held on.

"Fuck her like a savage, Sam. I want to see her get it hard."

He looked at Josella. "Give me your tongue. Now."

Brianna watched Josella lean forward and Sam kissed her with an open mouth. Josella's fingers dug into her shoulders. Brianna's hips jerked forward against Sam. He plunged forward into her cunt in response. When he broke the kiss, he looked down at Brianna. "Josella wants to see a savage fucking."

"I heard." Brianna breathed heavily. "Do it."

* * * * *

Erik entered medical. He spotted Leila leaning over one of the lab tables. She looked in deep concentration and hard at work, so he didn't interrupt her. He saw Alexa in the back of the room, hovering over the babies.

Braden rose from the computer. "We all listened in. I knew something was up with Delemar, but I never –"

"None of us suspected, Braden. Not even Laszlo."

"I've always been able to read people better than that. Analyze situations. And act quickly to stop problems."

"Don't blame yourself. We've been under a lot of stress and with the oxygen at minimal, it's no wonder we're not in top form. It was almost too obvious with Delemar, now that I think about it."

"Not really, considering his position. Council members don't turn."

"This one did. Not suspecting him or someone in his position as a possible traitor is a mistake we won't make twice."

Braden nodded, a strained look on his face.

"I ordered Torque to release Halah and Kam. And told him to order Kam to help Halah in the search."

"Good. Is the decontamination room ready?"

"Yes. We're all set. Did Leila say how long it was going to take her to prepare everything for Earth?"

Braden briefly glanced toward the other side of the room, watching Alexa with the babies. His gaze softened. "Sometime tomorrow if we're lucky."

"Good. The sooner the better." He had a feeling if they didn't get out of here quickly they might not get out at all.

"Since decon is ready, Alexa and I will move the triplets into there directly. It'll be the safest place for them."

"Do you want to move supplies in now too or wait until the morning? Whoever is left down here won't have full run of the facility after the gas gets in, so they'll need food and water and a few other necessities."

"Right. They'll need enough for several days, in case we can't get anyone back right away. I'll start moving those things in too."

"What if we can't get anyone back here at all?"

"I don't want to think about that. Let's just handle one problem at a time. For now that means getting protection set up for everyone in case the Egesa and Frost show up."

"If the Egesa do show up and we cut the oxygen, you're sure we can get it back up and functioning long enough to finish what we need to do and launch the ships?" Erik worried about the integrity of the system, given they hadn't yet fixed the leak. The loss didn't seem to be escalating, which was good, but the slow and steady drain was definitely affecting them. They couldn't afford to let the levels drop much more.

"Yes. We can get things back to how they are now with almost no additional loss. It won't be a problem. I rechecked Torque's calculations. The procedure is our best chance. It's just after the outside gases get in that there won't be enough power and air to flush the poison out. Even if our oxygen and power were functioning at full capacity, after the launch bays are open to the atmosphere, that's it. With the Egesa, we'll just be cutting off the air, then restarting it."

The comm panel buzzed. "Braden?" Torque's voice came over the speakers.

He walked over to the panel and pushed a button. "Braden, here. What's up?"

"Halah and Kam are gone. They found a way out of the room. They broke through an internal wall and shorted out the door controls."

"Any indication of where they might have gone?"

"Not yet. I'll keep my eyes open. I'm taking over the search for Delemar. He and the others won't be hard to find. Three people can't disappear in this small facility for long."

"No." Erik walked over and spoke into the comm. "Do as I ordered earlier, Torque. See to the power drain and get it fixed if you can. I'll search for Delemar and the others. I'm armed in case Delemar causes problems or in case he's carrying a weapon we don't know about. I'll get Pitch and put him on the oxygen. Neither you nor he need to be dealing with Delemar. You both were too close to Tara." He wasn't even certain he'd be able to control himself around Delemar, for the man's actions had put *his* mate in danger and he'd be damned if he let anything happen to Leila.

Silence filled the room.

"Torque? Acknowledge," Braden ordered.

After a tense moment, a voice filtered over the system. "Acknowledged."

They disconnected and Erik looked at Braden. "He's going to do something stupid."

"Yeah, I know. You'd better find Delemar first. I want to talk to him. You want to check the vids?"

"No. They're on the sublevel. It's the only place they can hide. I'm on my way."

* * * * *

Brianna lay flat on the mats as Sam fucked her nonstop. Josella held her arms against the floor above her head as he thrust into her hard. Being restrained added a new intensity and she loved it.

"Fuck, I love your cunt." Sam came inside her but his cock remained stiff and ready to go again. "I can't get enough!"

"Don't stop," Josella said, her voice high with excitement. "Keep riding her hard."

"Ah...oh!" Another climax shot through Brianna. She'd come three times already. Or had it been four? The orgasms had exploded inside her so quickly, she'd lost count. The chemical transfer from his body to hers was affecting her more than in a normal Initiation. It had greatly increased her need to repeatedly orgasm. Too bad it hadn't also increased her stamina.

She didn't have any energy left to fuck him back. She didn't think he cared. Although he had climaxed inside her, the chemicals had kept his cock rock hard and his desire strong.

Josella suddenly released her. She moved to Sam's side and started slapping his ass. "Harder! Fuck her harder. Make her come again." Her hand smacked down against his cheeks in rapid succession.

"Yeah, baby. Make my ass burn." He thrust his cock hard into Brianna's cunt.

Brianna took everything he gave her. She saw Josella glancing around. She wondered what the young woman was looking for but didn't seem to be able to muster up enough energy to ask. Josella stopped and crawled off somewhere and Brianna couldn't see her anymore through the hanging sheets.

Sam grunted. "Where are you going? Get back here."

It had surprised Brianna at how much he enjoyed Josella smacking his butt. But then, during an Initiation, anything that stimulated was a good thing.

"I'm so close. Ah..." He thrust into her savagely and ground his hips against hers. "Squeeze my cock, Brianna. With your pussy muscles."

Brianna tried to do as he asked but she was worn out. She squeezed her muscles around his cock a couple of times, then sighed. "Sorry. That's the best I can do." She was about to concede that he might need to turn to Josella, when the young woman reappeared with the Initiation dildo in her hand.

Brilliant. "Do it," Brianna told her. "Quickly." Any chemicals on the object would be inactive at this point, so it would help Sam climax without reigniting his desire.

Josella stabbed the dildo into Sam's ass. Its self-lubrication allowed it to slide in easily. Even so, he sucked in a breath and stilled at the abrupt action.

"Ahhh..." Sam groaned. "Yeah. That feels so fucking good." His body jerked, pressing against Brianna, driving his cock farther into her.

Brianna gasped at the incredible feeling of having him so deeply embedded in her body. Exactly where she wanted him to be.

He started to fuck her again. Frantically.

Josella fucked him just as frantically with the dildo, rising onto her knees for better leverage and using two hands now. "You like this, Sam?"

"Yes!"

"Good. Because I'm going to fuck your ass until you can't take it anymore."

Despite her weariness, Brianna's body responded to their words and actions. She pumped her hips up against his. "Oh...oh, Sam!"

"She's about to come for us again, Sam. Keep driving that huge cock of yours into her cunt. Make her feel it."

Brianna really hadn't believed she could come again, but she was so close. Sam's gaze locked with hers. Her body tensed and flutters of ecstasy rolled through her. "I'm coming!"

"Damn, yes!" Sam shouted and came hard. "Ah, ah...oh! Yeah, fuck me! Both of you. This is so hot!" He trembled all over as his cum filled her. "Yeah!" After two more thrusts into her cunt, he sighed and collapsed on top of her, his breathing labored.

With a smile on her face, Josella slowed the dildo in his ass, moving it gently now as she went shallow, then deep. "Nothing feels as good as a double fuck, I'm told."

She slowly pulled the dildo from his ass and set it aside. She leaned down and licked his ass cheek with long strokes, causing Sam to jerk and groan. Brianna stroked his hair, letting him stay on top of her.

Josella rose slightly. "Can I tongue-fuck your ass now, Sam? All the way to the end this time?"

Brianna noticed the woman didn't wait for an answer. She knew Josella had stuck her tongue in Sam's asshole when his cock started to get hard inside her and he made a strangled sound in the back of his throat. Apparently the chemicals hadn't worn off yet and he was still in need.

"I'm insatiable. I do want more." Sam's hips slowly began pumping. "Ah, your wet tongue feels great. Shove a finger in there too, Josella. Oh yeah. Perfect. Can you get another one in? Ah, fuck...yes!"

Brianna licked at his lips. She'd go for as long as he needed her. He plunged into her pussy, using hard downward thrusts. "Sam," she whispered, "what are you feeling?" Though she was committed to sticking this out with him, the chemicals really should be waning by now.

"Like I'm getting the rim job of a lifetime!" He squeezed her breasts, then twisted her nipples. "I need you to come again."

"Ah!" Brianna arched.

"Oh fuck. Josella's curling her tongue inside me. I'm going to come again!" He shot his cum into Brianna, moaning long and hard.

Brianna teased his flat nipples with her fingers, keeping him going. If they could just wear him out.

Josella raised up, a smile on her face. "Keep fucking, Sam. I'm going to get a third finger in here. Wait. Just about. Yes. There!"

"Ah...yeah!" Sam went wild.

"That's right. Pump her cunt, Sam. Do it hard!"

Brianna's body reacted to Josella's words and Sam's fucking as he thrust his cock into her, totally out of control. She could see the concentrated look on Josella's face, the aggressive way her arm moved as she finger-fucked Sam's ass with force.

Brianna's fingers curled around Sam's arms. "I'm close."

"I can't—" Sam's voice came out strangled.

Josella began smacking his ass as she fucked him. "Raise up a little, Sam, toward me." She stopped spanking him and scooted up some, her fingers still buried deeply inside his ass. "I'll bite this nipple. Brianna, you bite the other one. He'll come so hard. Don't stop until he's done."

"Yes," he groaned. "Do it."

Brianna swirled her tongue around one nipple, watching Josella as best she could. At the same time, both women bit down on the sensitive buds.

"Ah...hell!" Sam shouted. "Bite me! Harder! Yes!" Cum shot out of him like a rocket.

Brianna came too, barely able to hold on to Sam's nipple as the ecstasy rolled through her body. Every pore of her felt filled with his essence. She heard Josella moan and wondered if she'd spontaneously come just from the intensity of the situation.

Sam jerked and shook. Finally, after several moments, he collapsed. Josella pulled her fingers from his ass.

Brianna felt completely fulfilled. Completely spent. She pushed and Sam rolled off her and onto his back. She inwardly cursed when she saw his cock was still semi hard.

"I need to come again," he said.

"I can't." Brianna shook her head. She couldn't do anything but lie there.

Josella sat silently, then put aside the medicated cleanser she'd grabbed to clean her fingers. "I'll do it. I need to come something fierce." She started to climb on top of him, an eager look on her face.

So, she hadn't come. Brianna glanced at the two, her heart twisting.

Sam grabbed Josella's waist, stopping her. "No."

"Sam, you have to let her," Brianna cajoled. He couldn't play with his life by refusing.

"I'm not that bad off. Just use your hand again, Josella. On me and on yourself."

Josella sat beside him and frowned. "I can suck you off." Her fingers trailed down his chest and stomach. "Wouldn't you like that better? You can lick my pussy at the same time if you want."

He hesitated a moment, the sexual tension in the room escalating, then he shook his head.

Brianna's heart filled with love and she felt like crying. He was doing this for her. She knew it. She reached over and touched his hand. She could probably use her own hand or mouth on him, but as tired as she was right now, she wouldn't do a good job. "Do as he says, Josella."

Josella hesitated, then sighed. "All right." She wrapped her hand around his shaft. She massaged and tugged on his cock. "Are you sure you don't want inside my pussy?" she whispered in a husky voice. "You can come in me over and over."

"Yeah. I'm sure," he ground out. "Just follow my instructions," Sam ordered her. Clutching Brianna's hand, he raised up on his elbows to watch. "Harder. Jerk it good. And rub your clit."

Josella spread her legs, draping one across Sam's thighs, so they all could see as she massaged her clit. Sam's gaze shifted from his cock to her pussy and back again.

More quickly than Brianna thought physically possible for an Earth man—even during an Initiation—he came again, his seed spurting out.

"Oh yeah." He was breathing hard. "Faster. Keep me coming." Josella's eyes dilated and she came at the same time. Her juices coated his skin. Sam groaned long and loud, until all his seed had been spent. Then he collapsed and was once more silent.

"Thanks," she said as Josella moved off him. "He wore me out and I can barely move. You didn't need to continue enticing him though after he refused you." She didn't know Josella that well but her words and actions seemed out of character.

"I thought it might make him come harder if he visualized fucking someone. Did he hurt you? He was so...out of control."

Brianna glanced at Sam, whose eyes were closed. He didn't say anything and she wasn't certain if he was even listening. "No. I'm all right, just exhausted," she answered truthfully, not so certain about the truth of Josella's visualization explanation. "If you thought he'd been too rough with me, why did you keep encouraging him and why did you try to mount him?"

She shrugged. "I've never experienced anything like that. Anything so wild. I wanted to see it, to be a part of it. I thought..." She shrugged again but didn't finish her sentence.

That sounded like the truth. She'd wanted wild sex. Something she'd never been a part of. Brianna could understand the desire. She'd felt the same need when she'd been younger and less experienced.

"Is it always like this? In an Initiation."

"They're all different. But they're all intense. That's why usually three people initiate." The fact that Sam hadn't touched Josella sexually impressed her tremendously. It had to have taken great strength for him not to give in to the desires raging within his system.

"Is he done?" Josella looked down at his flaccid cock.

Brianna looked at his cock too. "Yes. You can go. He'll be all right now." He'd been well satiated. The effects of the chemicals inside him would now begin to ease. When he did need more sex, she could handle it with her hand or mouth, if not her body. It shouldn't take that long for her strength and energy to return.

Josella stood to gather her clothing.

Now that everything had stabilized, Brianna was certain Laszlo would head to medical to help Leila. Pitch would go wherever Braden needed him. She and Sam would finally have some privacy.

The others would allow them the time they needed to rest up from the rite. She snuggled closer to Sam, the only man outside her own family she'd ever felt such a deep connection to. She liked the feeling.

After he got his strength back, she'd take him to Laszlo's quarters. Laszlo and Leila would be hard at work for several hours at least. That would give them another chance to be alone before they separated for who knew how long.

Their futures were so incredibly shaky. Possibly even nonexistent. She wished they could simply run away together and forget about everything else but she knew that was impossible.

Earth had to be saved. Xylon had to be salvaged. All free systems needed protection from Daegal and the Egesa who served him.

Xylon couldn't do it alone anymore. Earth certainly couldn't do it alone. None of the other nearby systems had an effective military force. But together, Xylon's survivors and the people of Earth stood a good chance of setting up a permanent alliance that would be beneficial to all.

After Josella finished dressing and the doors slid closed behind her, Sam stirred and wrapped his arms around Brianna. "Are we alone?" He wanted to be able to talk to her freely without anyone eavesdropping.

"Mmm-hmm."

He glanced up at the vid-monitors and saw no red lights. They'd been turned off. "I actually feel good. I'd expected, well, I don't know...something different." Physically, he felt sexually satisfied, also quite relaxed now and a bit sleepy. Mentally, he felt somewhat confused but not as badly as he'd thought he would be.

"No adverse side effects?"

"I feel a little slow mentally, like I'm in a fog. But it's clearing. Are you all right?" He rubbed her arm. "Was I too rough? I, um, heard what Josella said. Tell me the truth." It would rip his heart out if he'd hurt her.

"I'm fine. Don't worry." When he squeezed her waist and made an uncomfortable sound, she added, "That's the truth. I swear. Do you remember everything that happened?"

"Most of it. I think." Had he fucked Josella? No. He didn't think so, though he did remember her coming. He also remembered her fucking him in the ass as he fucked Brianna.

"You handled the chemicals better than most. Even these altered ones, which were far stronger than the ones given to you in the Lair. You must have some natural resistance. Thankfully, Leila got what she needed."

He pushed aside the sexual memories for now, not wanting to become aroused again until Brianna had a chance to recover. "I hope any resistance my body may have doesn't render the sample inactive and not usable."

"I doubt it. It actually should allow Leila to make a stronger formula so the injections work better when we get to Earth. The important thing was to get your sperm while you were under the influence of the chemicals. We did, so it all should work out just as planned."

"You know a lot about the medical procedure?" He was always impressed with Brianna's knowledge, her skills and her willingness to accept new ideas in her life and new possibilities for her future.

"Just the theory behind it. I studied up on it a bit. Knowledge—"

"Is power."

"Exactly. When you feel up to it, I thought we'd go back to Laszlo's quarters. Spend the night there. We'll most likely be leaving in the morning, barring any unexpected delays. At least that's what I'm figuring, given what I know needs to be done."

"Tomorrow, huh? Well, I am eager to get back to Earth...but not so eager." The conflict inside him made his head hurt. They were on the same side, so no conflict should actually exist, but somehow he suspected they were in for a very bumpy ride.

His arms tightened around her and an unfamiliar stab of fear suddenly struck his heart. "This won't be the end for us. No matter what happens after we leave here, Brianna." He kissed the top of her head tenderly, never wanting to let her go. "Promise me you won't give up on us."

She snuggled closer to him. "I promise."

Chapter Eighteen

Alexa finished changing the babies. She and Braden were getting ready to move them into the decontamination room along with some supplies. Braden thought it was better to get the triplets in there now, instead of waiting until trouble arrived. She definitely agreed.

Leila remained hard at work. Once Laszlo arrived to help, everything should progress more quickly. Leila didn't seem to anticipate any problems. They'd gotten a usable sample from Briggs to work with. All of which had sounded good to her when she'd heard Leila talking to Braden about it.

Now if only — Her nose suddenly twitched. Ew! What the hell was that foul odor? Another malfunction of some sort with the ventilation system maybe? The babies were even fussing.

After making certain the triplets were all right, she moved toward the other side of the room to check out the smell. Alexa looked at Braden who'd apparently noticed the odor too, from the scowl on his face. He held out his arm, indicating she should stay there as he stepped toward the medical entry.

Someone large filled the doorway, stepping up from the corridor, but she couldn't see who from her angle.

Braden jerked back. "Egesa!" he shouted, drawing his disruptor.

Alexa's heart leapt to her throat. *No!* She rushed back to shield the babies.

Leila's head snapped up and she quickly turned.

"Run!" Braden fired, blocking the Egesa's path with his body.

Leila grabbed handfuls of her work and rushed toward the back. "Into the supply room," she ordered.

Alexa was already headed that way with the two girls in her arms. "My son," she pleaded.

"I'll get him." Leila tossed the items she'd retrieved inside a metal case and secured it, then rushed to grab the boy.

Disruptor fire and chaos filled the room as Braden and the Egesa dodged and exchanged fire.

Alexa shook so badly she feared she'd drop one of the babies before getting them to safety. They needed help! The facility should have recorded a breach and alerted them.

After they got the babies inside the supply room, Leila slammed and locked the door. Alexa knew they were still in grave danger for the door wasn't electronic. It

wouldn't keep an Egesa out for long. But certainly Braden would kill the intruder before he reached them.

"Shit." Leila frowned.

"What?"

"I forgot to sound the alarm." She started for the door.

"No!" Alexa pulled her back. The sound of disruptor fire continued to fill the air and she had to raise her voice. "Are you crazy? You're unarmed. You'll be killed."

"Braden will provide me cover. I have to go."

Alexa could see Leila's determination. She pulled out the pain inducer. "Here. At least take this."

Leila pushed the weapon aside and shook her head. "That's useless against a disruptor. Besides—"

All of a sudden everything fell quiet. Too quiet. As if someone had hit a mute button.

Worry for Braden clutched Alexa hard. She slid the pain inducer back into her jacket and looked over at the babies who were whimpering. "Shh, babies. Shh."

"I don't like this," Leila said, a look of concern on her face. "It's too quiet."

Alexa pressed her ear to the door. As she listened, her own worry increased. "Your hearing's better than mine," she whispered to Leila. "Can you make out anything?"

As Leila moved closer, something heavy thumped against the door. Alexa jumped back and both she and Leila gasped.

"Braden," she whispered, choking on a sob. If he were able, he'd never have allowed the Egesa to get to the door.

The door rattled again, taking another blow.

"Why isn't he shooting out the lock?" she asked, her thoughts racing. Braden had to be all right. She'd never survive without him.

"He's after the babies. A stray shot might strike one of them. He's not going to stop until he gets in. It's just a matter of time. And you can bet he's not down here alone. Do you have the transport-connector?"

Alexa's heart hammered. *No, no, no.* "I can't leave. Braden—"

"You have to save the babies."

The babies. She glanced over at them. She held back her tears and stiffened her spine, trying to be strong. The safety of her children took priority over everything else. She would protect her babies with her life. No matter how badly she didn't want to leave, she knew that she had to. For them. "I don't have a supply pack. Braden was going to prepare a special one."

Leila searched the shelves. "Here. You'll have to take what we've got." She pulled down a thin pack. "Take off your jacket, put this on, then put your jacket over it. You

can become acquainted with the contents later. Oh wait. Let me stuff these extra diapers inside the pockets of your jacket."

"Thanks." After Leila finished, Alexa moved quickly, getting prepared to dematerialize out. Nerves got the better of her and she shook uncontrollably, barely able to get her jacket back on over the pack. "Do the supplies include water?" The pack had looked so thin that she couldn't help but wonder.

"Yes. In a specially designed gel holder. There's not a lot, so conserve it. If you run out, go down to the innermost section of the repair station. The temperature controls there will be on minimum. The older equipment will likely be producing some condensation. Enough to keep you alive."

Alexa nodded, not sure how she was supposed to tote around three babies on her own. The few diapers Leila had given her wouldn't last any time at all. She'd have to figure something out. She reached for the transport device, going over in her head what she was supposed to do.

"It'll work better if you sit down," Leila suggested. "I'll get the babies in your lap."

"Good idea."

She and Leila both jumped in response to another heavy thud. The door cracked down the middle.

Alexa sat on the floor and Leila brought over the babies, one at a time. They lay half on her lap and half against her chest. She kept her arms around them to support their bodies. She clutched the transport-connector in one hand. As she stared into her son's eyes, so much like his father's, Braden filled her thoughts. "If Braden's hurt—"

"I'll fix him," Leila interrupted. "Don't think the worst. Frost most likely ordered him unharmed and to be captured, given their personal history. Can you feel the connection to him through your brain chip?"

She shook her head. "I've never been able to work that stupid thing. For the most part." Her eyes widened. "You don't think that means—"

"No. Don't worry. He probably got past the Egesa and went for reinforcements, thinking we were safe in here. You need to go. Now. While you have the chance."

Leila was making excuses to try to stop her from worrying. They both knew Braden would never leave them. They'd run out of choices and time. Alexa engaged the transport-connector.

The supply room door flew open. The edge smacked her arm as she was about to push the transport button on the device. "Ow!" Her finger slipped and she hit the wrong button. "Uh-oh."

The Egesa soldier, much larger than the Egesa who had tracked her on Earth, grabbed and tossed Leila out the door. Alexa's heart pounded. She heard a scream and barely recognized it as her own.

She pressed the correct button on the connector, hoping she hadn't messed up anything and praying Leila would be all right. As the Egesa reached for her, she felt herself getting lightheaded and then she and the babies were gone.

* * * * *

Eric froze in the corridor. He'd heard something that didn't sound right. His heart pounded harder. Without another thought, he turned and quickly headed back toward medical.

As he got closer to the med facility, he knew that he'd heard correctly. Disruptor fire! He pulled out his weapon and rushed forward.

As he did so, everything fell quiet. A slight lingering of some foul odor hit him. Familiar somehow.

Laszlo turned the corner, having come down the opposite side of the split corridor, and both men stopped. Laszlo communicated through Warrior hand signals, obviously having heard the same thing he had.

Erik nodded his understanding. Egesa! Of course. His pulse raced. That was the smell. Laszlo had known immediately. The low oxygen had slowed his thinking more than he'd realized.

He did his best to approach the medical facility with caution. Knowing Leila was in there and probably in danger made it hard to keep his composure.

Then he heard a scream. It sent a chill right down his spine.

He and Laszlo took opposite sides of the entry. Erik went in first, his weapon ready. The place was a mess with everything overturned and a lot of the equipment damaged from disruptor fire. No Egesa. If one or more had been there, they had dematerialized out. Nobody could have gotten past them any other way. "Leila?" He didn't see her and panic tightened his insides.

Laszlo rushed forward. "Braden's down." He kneeled on the floor.

Erik came up beside him, his heart in his throat. Braden was halfway under a fallen table. He helped Laszlo move him into the clear. "Is he alive?"

"Yes. He's unconscious though. Disruptor damage to his side, leg and head."

Erik heard a moan. "Leila?" He made his way to the back and saw the supply room door cracked and practically ripped off. Leila was sprawled just outside.

She pushed herself to a sitting position as he reached her.

He went down on his knees and wrapped his arm around her, relief pulsing through him to find her alive. "Are you all right?" He looked her over and saw a bruise on her arm but no other injuries.

"Egesa. They're here. One tossed me out of the supply room like I was a twig. Knocked me out cold for a moment. Other than that, I'm fine. Braden?"

"He's alive. Unconscious. He's been hit."

Her eyes widened and she started to get up.

He pulled her back down. "Just sit here a minute and get your breath. Laszlo is taking care of him. No Egesa were here when we entered, but they're probably still in the shelter somewhere. We'll need to be careful."

"Only one trapped us here in medical. More will be with him though, I'm sure. Why didn't he kill us?"

"I don't know. Maybe he heard me and Laszlo coming and didn't have time." He glanced around. "Where's Alexa?"

"Dematerialized out."

"With the babies?"

"Yes. I heard the transport-connector engage as I was losing consciousness." She leaned into his embrace, obviously mentally and physically exhausted.

Erik nodded, holding her close. "Good. They'll be safe on the repair station. Frost wouldn't think of looking for them there. Even if she does, we'll send in a rescue team long before that. Hopefully." Feeling Leila's heart beating as rapidly as his own, he realized how close he'd come to losing his love.

He glanced back toward Braden. Laszlo had lifted him onto one of the medical beds. Normally their self-healing elements saved their wounded Warriors. But head injuries were always tricky.

Alexa and the babies flashed through his mind. If his best friend died, the repercussions would be greater than anyone could imagine.

* * * * *

Pitch caught up with Josella in the corridor. "I heard Brianna tell you to leave. Are you all right?"

She nodded, a slight blush on her face and she wouldn't directly meet his gaze. "I'm fine."

"The chemicals didn't affect you?" Briggs hadn't actually fucked her, so he doubted anything had gotten inside her body, though she could have absorbed some chemicals through her skin from handling the dildo. She actually seemed more embarrassed than anything. Probably from knowing he'd been watching.

He wouldn't have minded if she'd been affected at least a little and needed him. Fucking her was not an unpleasant thought. As he'd watched her finger-fuck herself then jerk off Briggs, he'd almost come. If Laszlo hadn't been in the room, he would have undone his uniform and climaxed by his own hand.

He'd barely managed to fight back his desire before approaching her. Coming up on her with his cock bulging would not have been becoming of a Warrior, to say the least.

They continued down the corridor, side by side, heading toward the private quarters. She hadn't answered him yet, which he found curious. "Josella?" he prompted, wondering at her thoughts.

"Um, sorry. I haven't noticed any effects out of the ordinary. Well, other than a natural reaction to, well, everything." She shrugged. "You know?"

He cocked his head, glancing at her as they walked. From her response, he realized that she was in sexual need after all. Not from the chemicals but just from being sexually aroused by everything that had happened. "Yeah, I know," was all he decided to say, not sure how he should respond. His cock knew though. Damn it!

He had to control his urges. She wasn't Xylon, so he didn't want to offend her by pushing too fast.

"I was wondering..."

His heart pounded as they turned the corner. Perhaps her thoughts did mirror his own. Hope and desire filled him. "Wondering?"

She stopped and lightly touched his arm. The look she gave him, through slightly lowered lashes, was unmistakable need. He groaned and his control disappeared. Without another word from her, he backed her up against the wall. His fingers squeezed her breast and played with her nipple through her top, causing her to moan.

"Aw hell. That's such a sexy sound."

"Pitch," she whispered in a breathy voice, her fingers clutching at the material of his uniform.

She looked so much in need that his fingers shook as he reached to open her pants. It had been too long since his cock had been inside a woman's pussy.

She reached for his pants at the same time. "I need your cock, Pitch. In me now. And your tongue. Please."

"Hell yeah."

When he leaned in to kiss her, still fumbling with her closures, her head snapped to the side and she raised her nose into the air. "Shit!" She pushed him away forcefully, grabbed his arm and pulled him down the corridor.

"What?" He stumbled after her, his brain still in fuck mode.

"Egesa. Here. Now. Coming this way."

"What?" He glanced around, his thoughts clearing immediately. "Are you sure?"

"I spent enough time running from them on the Sand Moon. I know that smell when it hits me. Hurry."

They started to make another turn but she pulled on his arm again. "No. They've split up and are surrounding us. We have to go down to the sublevel and around."

"They? How many? Can you tell?"

"Two. But there are probably others elsewhere."

He nodded. "We'll sound the alarm at the substation. We need to get to the decontamination room. Keep that nose sharp because I'm unarmed." Apparently her sense of smell was stronger than his sense of hearing. Or maybe he'd just been too distracted by her body to hear the Egesa coming. Either way, he was impressed with her. In more ways than one.

They headed for a sublevel ladder and made their way down. When they got to the bottom, Pitch turned to her. "Are we all right?"

She nodded. "They're not down here...yet. Let's go."

They started forward and ran right into Halah and Kam. Halah immediately took a defensive stance against him, probably thinking he was there to force her and Kam back to their room. Erik had told him about their detainment while they were working on the orbiters. Kam looked so surprised to see them that he stumbled backward a step.

The noise on the sublevel, from the old machinery, could be quite loud when multiple systems were activated or almost completely quiet when nothing was running. Right now his ears were ringing, as probably everyone else's were.

Josella stared at Halah's fight position. "What are you doing?"

"Relax," Pitch told Halah, wanting to defuse the situation quickly. Josella hadn't known about her sister's detainment and he saw no reason to tell her now. "We found out that Delemar is the traitor. Thanks to Josella."

"Josella?" Halah relaxed her stance, looking at her sister.

"So it *was* Delemar," Kam said at the same time.

"Yeah. Details later. We've got bigger problems right now. Egesa are in the facility. Josella smelled them."

Halah looked wary. She sniffed the air. "I don't smell anything."

"They're up top," Josella said. "They probably haven't been here long or their smell would be stronger and lingering everywhere. We have to sound the alarm."

"How certain are you that what you smelled were Egesa?" Kam asked. "I'm not getting anything. My sensors have been weakening and this ancient machinery is playing havoc with me."

"I'd bet my life on it."

"Good enough for me. To the substation," Kam said, already heading back that way. "We'll set the alarm and issue instructions from there."

* * * * *

As Sam and Brianna stepped from the conference room, a pulsing alarm went off. They both froze.

Uh-oh. That can't be good, Sam thought. "What —"

Brianna held up a hand, silencing him.

Kam's voice came over the speakers. "We have a breach. Proceed to the decon room immediately."

"Egesa," Brianna told him. "It has to be. Or Frost with her Agents. Either way, we're in trouble. I don't have a weapon. Damn it." She looked at him. "Do you have anything stashed away somewhere we can use?"

He saw the hope in her eyes. "Unfortunately, no." He glanced up and down the corridor, looking for any intruders, wishing he had some sort of weapon. His superiors had thought it too risky though. They'd been correct but he and Brianna could definitely use one right now, if the look on her face was any indication.

"We've got to try to get to the decontamination room. It's not far. Stay sharp. If you smell something unpleasant, start moving in the opposite direction. That means one or more Egesa are close."

"If they popped up down here, can't they pop into the decon room if they want?"

"No. You can only dematerialize into a decontamination room from a signal sent from the room controls. You can't use a handheld device to get in. It's a security feature."

They turned a corner. Still clear. Sam breathed a sigh of relief. Though what Brianna had said bothered him. "Um, *we* materialized in using a handheld device."

She glanced at him as they rushed forward. "Not actually. Laszlo locked in on the handheld device to locate your presence once you activated the transport-connector properly. *Our* presence, as it turned out. He issued the signal that brought us here from that, using the multitransport feature of the device."

"I don't see the difference."

"The source of origin is the difference."

"Okay." He supposed, not that he understood how that worked exactly but he would take her word for it. Except... "Laszlo already knew I was in that experimental area of the Lair. Why didn't he just snatch me from there?"

"He would have needed exact coordinates and he had no way of knowing whether you'd been moved or not. This way." They turned down a corridor.

"Wait. This can't be the way," Sam said, confused. He knew the main passages and this wasn't one of them.

"We need to stay away from the direct corridors. The Egesa are more likely to use those. This is a service corridor and swings around."

"Isn't there a decon panel in the main control room?" he asked, still thinking about their security features.

"Yes. But hopefully it will take the Egesa longer to figure that out than it will for us to cut off the oxygen. Besides, knowing Torque, he's taken those main controls offline or programmed in a pass code."

Sam saw the worry on Brianna's face and knew she wasn't so certain.

When they turned again, Brianna looked behind them. "Stop for a second," she whispered. "I think someone's following us."

Sam stopped and listened. He didn't hear anything but the hair on the back of his neck rose in warning. That particular warning had served him well over the years and he wasn't about to ignore it now. He nodded. "I think you're right. Good instincts," he whispered back.

"Superior hearing. He's alone and probably unsure whether we're armed, otherwise he'd have attacked already. Are you up for an ambush?"

Sam's heart pounded. "Hell yeah."

* * * * *

Laszlo rolled the medical bed with Braden on it into decon. Erik stayed close, wishing his friend would wake up, so he'd know for certain Braden was on the way to recovery. Leila followed. She carried the medical case she'd stored the sperm sample in, along with some papers and other vials. He'd questioned its contents when she'd insisted on bringing it along.

Erik stood just inside the door, disruptor ready, waiting for the others to arrive. Every minute that passed felt like an eternity.

"Kam must have come across an Egesa for him to issue the alarm," Leila said, looking over Braden and his injuries.

Erik nodded. He'd been about to issue the same alert from medical, when Kam's warning had come over the comm system.

"I hope he's all right. And Halah. I imagine they're together," she continued, her voice sounding shaky.

"At least Halah has her electrical powers." Erik glanced back at Leila. He worried that all this was finally getting to her. "They won't be totally defenseless."

"Those powers won't do her or anyone with her much good unless she can get close enough for hand to hand combat," Laszlo reminded him, coming forward.

Erik couldn't understand why this damn shelter wasn't stocked with weapons. "Why isn't this shelter outfitted for battle?" he asked Laszlo.

"We were in the process of upgrading. We'd removed a lot of the old supplies and some equipment but hadn't finished refurbishing all the underground facilities yet."

"And you picked one of the unfinished ones to bring us to. Wonderful."

"I didn't know this was going to happen. Not like this. This one had the research equipment I needed."

Not like this. What the hell kind of research was so important that he had to disappear to do it? Every explanation Laszlo gave seemed to be a half truth at best. Erik's frustration kicked up a notch but he was too concerned about the others to worry over Laszlo's words. For now. Besides, he was tired of trying to figure out Laszlo's

riddles. The man rarely spoke straight out and it had become more than irritating. "If Briggs, Brianna, Josella and Pitch are still in the conference room, they should be here any minute. That's not far."

"But they're not armed." Laszlo headed back toward the rear of the room and retrieved Braden's disruptor. "They might need cover."

"Wait. What are you doing?" Leila asked.

"I'm going after them. Without Briggs, everything falls apart. Earth will not listen to us if their representative ends up dead. They already look on our motives with uncertainty and consider our actions suspicious."

"Once Daegal arrives on Earth, they'll trust us." Erik wasn't so certain involving Earth so deeply in their fight was wise. Though, because of time constraints, he supposed they actually had little choice in the matter. Still, he would rather have developed a trained military among the planets in their own quadrant. They might have faced political roadblocks but he'd be more trusting of the outcome.

"Their response depends on whether Daegal attacks right away or tries to woo them over to his side with empty promises and lies about us. We need Earth now just as much as they need us. Though they don't know that. Yet. I'm not taking a chance on Briggs getting killed."

"We should give Brianna and the others a few minutes." Erik looked up and down the corridor. "Putting yourself in danger —"

"I'm going."

Laszlo brushed past him and disappeared from view around a side corridor.

Leila sighed and her attention returned to Braden. "Daegal's evil has no end."

She was right but all Erik could think about was Laszlo's impulsiveness. He should have waited. Brianna and Pitch were very capable officers.

Laszlo was an icon to their people. Finding him alive would inspire loyalty and commitment among Xylon's survivors. If he got himself killed, it would definitely make the reorganization of the Warrior fleets harder. It had been hard enough when he had disappeared before Xylon was destroyed.

Only those closest to the man had their suspicions and doubts about him. Everyone else would follow Laszlo without question and that's the kind of loyalty they needed right now.

"Erik, Braden's coming around."

Erik closed the door and locked it, not wanting to leave them exposed to the Egesa. He activated the outside monitors, so he could see anyone coming. He walked over to Leila and Braden. "Hey, buddy."

"Alexa?" he whispered.

"Safe. Dematerialized out."

"I-I can't get a reading on her." His voice was barely audible and scratchy.

"You took a hit to the head," Leila said. "It might have affected your chip."

He reached into his jacket. "My vid-comm." He cringed as he moved.

Erik reached inside to get it for him. His stomach clenched as he looked at the readout. Nothing had registered. Shit! Had the transport-connector worked or not?

"She's fine," he lied, doing his best to control his expression. Were they dead? His heart sank at the thought. Nobody could do anything to help Alexa now, so he saw no reason to worry Braden. He'd do the worrying for all of them and tell his friend later, after they got out of here.

"Just rest," Leila said. "We're safe in the decon room."

"Everyone?"

"Not yet," Erik informed him. "They're on their way. The alarm has been issued."

Braden tried to sit up.

"Not so fast." Erik pushed him back down, then slid the vid-comm into his own jacket, not wanting Braden to see the blank screen.

"You shouldn't try to get up," Leila warned, shaking her head. "You'll need a few more hours at least. Your leg and side are already healing nicely but your head will take more time. Don't worry. Erik has everything under control."

She smiled at him and he smiled back, though he felt very out of control at the moment. When he looked back down, he saw that Braden had passed out again. "Is he really going to be all right?"

"I think so. Rest is the best thing for him right now." She turned toward the monitor. "Where is everyone?"

"They'll be moving slower, especially since they're unarmed for the most part. Keeping to the side and service corridors and the sublevel. The Egesa will stay in the main areas of the facility at first while they get a feel for the place and check out any schematics they can pull up on the main computer."

"We should have agreed on a code. Kept our location secret."

"They *will* expect the message they heard was coded and assume decon is a trap or a decoy. At first. They won't descend on us immediately until they assess the situation. At least that's standard military procedure. You know that."

She scratched her head. "Yes I do. Or did. I'm so worn out that my brain is mush."

His heart went out to her. He wanted to hug her close and tell her everything was going to be all right, though he wasn't certain himself. But they all had to stay strong and alert right now until the danger passed. Letting their guard down, even to comfort one another, would need to wait. "Being direct as Kam was will probably give us a little extra time while the Egesa are trying to figure things out. But eventually they will check out this room and try to get in."

"Let's just hope everyone makes it here before the Egesa do. If not, then we're going to have a big problem."

They were going to have bigger problems if Alexa and the triplets weren't safe. For now, he was going to assume they'd arrived at their destination and for some reason the vid-comm just wasn't signaling. It was the only way he'd be able to maintain his sanity.

* * * * *

"All right," Kam said. "Up the ladder and decon is around the corner." He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. The air was really thin. He and Halah hadn't finished with their repairs yet. The malfunction had involved different areas and they'd only fixed the first of three key elements.

"I should head up before the rest of you," Josella said. "I'll be able to smell if an Egesa is near."

"No way," Halah said. "I'm armed. My electrical powers, combined with my jacket shield, gives me the most protection. I'm going up first. I know their scent too. If they come up on us fast, I might be able to take out one of them before they realize what's happening and get us a weapon."

"You don't know their smell as well as I do. I can give us more lead time to get away or to set up an ambush."

"Then you follow me and stay close."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Pitch said. "You ladies are not leading the way. I'm head of security. It's my job. Move aside."

"Don't even think of starting any of that male bullshit, Pantera," Halah said, giving him a serious look of intimidation. "I still outrank you, so back off."

"In your own head. Laszlo hasn't officially reinstated your rank."

"That's a minor point, given the gravity of our situation. I'm sure he —"

"Everyone calm down," Kam responded to the argument. None of them were thinking clearly and military protocol was breaking down. "I'm going first. Without the equipment down here interfering, I'll be able to sense them even with my weakening sensors. Halah is second for a quick defense. Josella, a close third in case I miss sensing someone. She'll be able to pick up odors in front and back in that position. Pitch, take the rear to make sure we're not hit from behind."

Halah cocked an eyebrow at him.

Kam held back the smile that threatened to take over his face. Technically, she outranked him too. But given her position, her rank was like Torque's used to be, mostly for show, as Pitch indicated, until fully reinstated by Laszlo.

Torque had been given back most privileges of rank but not his ability to command. Halah had never held a command rank but as a Class 1, when in good standing, she ranked higher than his own Class 2 position.

Still, he assumed her acquiescence and started forward. He might catch hell for it later, but for now, he figured the fastest way to shut them all up and get everyone moving was to take charge with a no-argument attitude.

They all hesitated and stared at him. Then at her.

Halah grunted. "Fine. Let's go, before we end up ambushed," she replied, falling into step behind him.

The others followed.

Chapter Nineteen

Movement caught Erik's eye. He looked up at the monitor and saw Torque coming down the corridor fast. He punched open the door and moved to the entry, weapon at the ready just in case. "Hurry. Get in."

Torque rushed inside and Erik backed up to the control panel to close the room. "Did you come across any Egesa?"

"Yep." Torque raised a weapon and waved it in show.

"An electro-zapper?" Erik frowned. "Hell, that's a crappy weapon. Not much more powerful than a pain inducer, except skin contact isn't necessary with that model. What was a soldier doing with that?"

"He wasn't a soldier."

Interesting. "What was he?"

"We didn't chat, Erik."

"Funny. What do you think?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. An advisor maybe, who wandered off on his own. Where's—" Torque's eyes widened. "Braden?" He rushed over to the portable bed. "What happened?"

"He got cornered in medical," Erik told him, following him over.

"He'll be all right," Leila added quickly, touching Torque's arm. "He was hit in the head, side and leg. He's been in and out. Sleep is the best thing for him right now."

"Alexa and the babies?" Torque asked.

"Dematerialized out," she answered.

Torque looked at Erik. "Quadrant Port XST?"

"Yes." At least he hoped so. "We'll send armed rescue ships for them after we get out of here and to our base on the Ice Moon." Torque must have overheard him and Braden in the control room, discussing the backup plan. Or maybe Braden had told him about the plan. Either way, he was glad that Torque knew. Torque's and Braden's relationship had been shaky for years but this tragedy, as well as recent incidents before this happened, had brought them closer again.

"Erik," Leila said. "Don't you find it odd that Laszlo never asked about Alexa and the triplets?"

She was right. Laszlo hadn't asked. "He probably overheard you tell me what happened." Though his natural suspicions had him wondering where Laszlo was concerned, especially since neither he nor Leila had mentioned the exact location where

Alexa had gone. He would have thought Laszlo would be curious about that,. Unless Braden had informed him of the plan.

"Look." Torque nodded toward the monitor.

Kam, Halah, Josella and Pitch were headed their way. Erik stepped closer to the entry. "Get the door, Torque. I'll give them cover." He readied his weapon.

Torque moved in front of the control panel. "Wait. We've got a problem. Two Egesa are coming the other way. Those bastards are setting up an ambush."

"Warn them."

"No need. Kam's sensed their presence," Leila said. "He knows they're coming. He and the others are backing away."

"All right," Erik began. "The Egesa will have to go right by the decon room door to continue after them. Once they pass, open it and I'll fire. I'll be able to get at least one. It'll be enough of a distraction for the others to get well away."

"We'll both fire," Torque said. "Leila, take over the controls. We can down both Egesa and clear the path for the others to get to us."

"With that nothing weapon, you have?" Erik wasn't comfortable with Torque facing an enemy with anything so weak. His shot would have to be spot on or...

"If I get one in the eye, he'll go down. I've done it before with a laser zapper, which is a very similar weapon. I used to practice on dung-rats."

"Nasty rodents. Hard to hit." Leila moved over to the controls. "I trust Torque's ability but what makes you think the Egesa are after Kam and the others and not simply headed here?"

"They're moving too fast," Erik said. "The Egesa spotted our people on one of the monitors and are headed to intercept. I'd bet my rank on it."

"I hope you're right. Because if they hesitate when they get to the decon door, opening it will be tricky if not downright deadly."

"They're getting close," Torque replied. "Are we set?"

"Whatever you decide, do it fast." Leila fingered the controls.

"I'll go low and take out the one on the right," Erik said, crouching down. "You go high and take the one on the left," he told Torque. "You're going to have to wait until he turns completely. Once he does, if you miss, one of us could end up dead."

"I'm not going to miss."

"Get ready," Leila warned. "If either of you gets hit, I'm closing up the room. All right. Opening. Now." She hit the button and the doors whooshed apart.

The Egesa turned at the sound. Erik fired first, getting one Egesa in the neck. He crumpled. Then Torque fired, piercing the other Egesa in the right eye. The creature got off a shot but it flew wild. He crashed to the corridor floor.

Erik hesitated a moment to make sure neither Egesa was moving. When he was certain, he stepped forward and nudged each creature with his boot. "It's clear!" he called out to the others.

Kam, Halah, Josella and Pitch came around the corner. Torque handed the electro-zapper to Pitch and took the disruptor from the Egesa he'd shot. Erik handed Kam the other Egesa's disruptor.

"Everyone inside," Leila said, stepping over to the door. "Before any more of them show up."

"How many are down here?" Pitch asked.

"Unknown," Erik answered.

Kam looked around the room as everyone filed in and the door closed behind them. "Where are Alexa and the others?"

"Alexa and the triplets dematerialized out," Erik told him. "Braden came up with a backup plan, using a transport-connector that Briggs had. They're safe on an orbiting repair station." The more he said it, the more he was apt to believe it, or so he kept telling himself. "Laszlo went in search of Brianna and Briggs. Braden took a hit." Erik motioned toward the back of the room. "He's all right, just out cold right now."

"What about Delemar?" Pitch asked. "Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Delemar is dead," Torque answered.

Everyone looked over at him.

"Broken neck."

Nobody said anything. But everybody suddenly looked very uncomfortable.

After a tense moment, Erik pulled Torque aside. "What happened?"

Torque shrugged.

"Don't brush this off. I want a report, Torque." He lowered his voice. "Did you kill him?"

Torque's eyes narrowed. When he answered, his voice came out tight and low. "That's the way I found him, Erik. It's what he deserved. I'm not going to feel sorry for the man or give it another moment's thought."

Erik didn't know whether to believe Torque's words or not. He was still hurting over Tara's loss and was more than capable of exacting revenge if he chose to. But if he truly hadn't killed Delemar, then that meant someone else had. One of the Egesa? Or one of them?

* * * * *

Sam circled back around a connecting corridor, trying to take the Egesa soldier by surprise while the creature continued to track Brianna. Luckily, the Egesa was alone.

If more soldiers came upon them, they'd be in trouble. But if he could down this one, they could get a weapon and they'd at least be armed if any others intercepted them before they reached decon. Also, another advanced weapon would come in handy later, on Earth.

Brianna had told him what to expect but he hadn't yet gotten a close look at these creatures that were supposedly half-lizard and half-humanoid looking.

When he eased around the corner, he saw and smelled the Egesa. Damn! Big bastard. With enough muscles to be a professional wrestler. The creature smelled as if he hadn't bathed in a month.

From the back he looked fairly human. Bald. One hand held his weapon, the other hung down by his side. Longer nails than what he would have expected, almost like claws. He wore some sort of brownish-gray uniform and heavy boots.

Sam started to make up the distance between them, moving as quietly as he could. He heard Brianna making noises up ahead, causing a distraction.

Something must have alerted the Egesa though, obviously a well-trained soldier, for he suddenly stopped, whirled around and raised his weapon. Sam froze at the sight of the Egesa's yellow eyes and the thin tongue that flickered out from his mouth.

He knew his mistake, his hesitation, had just cost him his life. The sharp sound of a shot filled the corridor.

His heart clenched. But he didn't go down.

The Egesa's eyes widened and he toppled forward, falling on his face. When he hit, the crash sounded deafening and the corridor floor rattled.

Sam's heart about stopped beating, then raced triple time. He saw Laszlo with a weapon in his hand and Brianna standing close by, worry evident on her face, which gradually turned to relief as she looked at him.

"Now you've seen one up close," Laszlo said, stepping nearer. "Don't freeze up again." He pulled the Egesa's weapon out from under him and handed it to Brianna.

"Let's go," Laszlo ordered. "We need to get to the decon room fast."

Sam fell in step behind Laszlo. Brianna took up the rear. He felt lucky to be alive. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

* * * * *

Erik paced. "Where are they?" The oxygen couldn't be cut off until everyone was accounted for. He refused to sacrifice even one of their people.

Worry rolled through him. If a group of Egesa arrived at the decon room first and tried to get in, he couldn't go ahead with their plan, for the others wouldn't be safe. He couldn't even dematerialize them in from another location. Decon security would have to be disengaged first and they couldn't do that from inside the room. He could leave the room and —

"Here they come. Laszlo and the others," Pitch announced, looking at the monitor. "Leila, get the door. We'll provide cover."

Kam and Torque stood at the entrance, acting as the primary line. Pitch, with the weakest weapon, hung back as did Erik, who watched the monitor. No Egesa looked to be in the immediate area.

"Now," Erik ordered.

The door slid open and Laszlo, Briggs and Brianna hurried inside.

Without warning, three Egesa suddenly appeared around a blind spot from the opposite corridor.

"Egesa!" Torque warned.

"Fire!" Erik shouted, issuing the order at almost the same moment.

Kam and Torque got off shots immediately, driving the Egesa back.

Laszlo and Brianna turned, ready to fire if necessary.

"Close the door!" Erik kept aim with the others, knowing the soldiers wouldn't give up now that they'd found them. "Leila!"

"It's glitching!" The doors slid partially closed, then stopped.

They all fired at once, trying to keep the Egesa at a distance.

The Egesa regrouped and surged back toward them, returning fire. Their protective uniforms prevented any direct body hits.

The doors finally whooshed completely closed. Right before the room sealed, several shots hit the doors and one flew into the room, barely missing Erik's cheek. The blast hit the far wall. It left a deep black scar but that's all the damage it did.

"Is everyone here?" Laszlo asked.

"Yes," Erik told him.

"Then cut the oxygen."

Torque moved to the control panel and began the procedure. "It'll take a few minutes."

"Braden?" Brianna rushed over to her brother.

"He's all right," Leila explained. "Hit in three places, but already healing fast. He needs sleep though."

"Where's Alexa?"

"She and the babies dematerialized up to the old repair station. A backup plan Braden devised using Briggs' transport-connector."

"Look," Pitch said. "The Egesa have transport-connectors."

"They can't get in," Laszlo and Torque said at the same time, both staring up at the monitor.

"It looks like they're doing something to the door now," Briggs said.

"Energy balls." Halah moved next to Kam.

"Are they strong enough to blow the door?" Josella asked.

"No way." Brianna stepped up beside Briggs and laced her arm through his.

Laszlo stepped closer to the monitor and his eyes widened. "Those aren't energy balls. They're nuclear orbs. Hit the floor!"

Everyone dove just as the door blew inward. Debris and shards of metal flew everywhere. Two more Egesa joined the other three and all five surged into the room, firing blindly through the smoke.

Pitch, Torque, Laszlo and Kam rolled to their knees and fired back. Erik scrambled to the control panel and hit the overhead lights, punching them to maximum. The glare would blind the Egesa, whose eyes were extra sensitive to bright lights. He heard them wail in pain and then in frustration as their shots missed their targets.

In the chaos, Halah got behind one of the Egesa and zapped his neck with an electrically charged chop. He went down immediately and she grabbed his weapon.

Briggs dragged Braden from the medical table and overturned it to use as a shield. Leila crawled behind it with them, pulling Josella along with her.

An Egesa headed their way and Erik took him out, getting him in the knee, then the head.

Torque wasn't wearing his Warrior jacket, with its built-in protective shield, and he suffered a hit to the arm. But his shot got an Egesa in the neck and the creature toppled.

Brianna's weapon jammed. "Shit!"

Erik saw an Egesa take aim at her. Damn it! Pitch was standing in his line of fire. "Brianna! Move!"

Her head snapped up.

Before Erik got a clear angle, Briggs rushed forward and tackled the soldier from behind. They crashed to the floor, Briggs landing on top. He grabbed the Egesa's head and snapped his neck.

The last Egesa turned to run but Laszlo was waiting and got him right between the eyes.

Erik felt lightheaded and dropped to his knees. "The oxygen," he whispered. He saw Torque holding his injured arm and crawling across the floor, trying to make it back to the control panel.

With the door blown out, the seal in the room had been broken. All their air was quickly being sucked out.

Laszlo fell into a heap. From lack of air or an injury, Erik didn't know and couldn't find the energy to make his way over to the man.

Torque finally struggled to his feet and staggered the rest of the way to the controls. He fell to his knees before the panel.

"Hurry," Erik encouraged in a low voice, unable to move or catch a full breath. He noticed everyone struggling to breathe. All of them had collapsed to the floor.

Torque reached up and punched a button with his palm. Then he slid flat onto the floor.

Erik heard the ventilation system kick on in the corridor and air whooshed back into the room. *Yes*. Sweet, beautiful air. Even a thin atmosphere was better than none at all. Then everything went black.

* * * * *

Brianna pushed into a sitting position. Her head pounded fiercely. She glanced around, wondering how much time had passed. "Sam?"

She remembered him saving her life. The disruptor Laszlo had given her must have jammed when the Egesa fell on it. She'd fixed the weapon but it had been too late, if Sam hadn't intervened.

Where had he disappeared to? Just as the thought entered her head, he stepped into the room from the corridor.

"All the Egesa are dead," he said. "I did a quick search. I moved the bodies into an empty room. All their equipment is in a pile by the control panel."

"Are you sure?" Erik asked groggily, pushing to a sitting position.

"If any more were down here, they'd be in our faces right now."

"Unless they're still knocked out from lack of air," Pitch said.

"I checked the main areas of the facility and didn't see anyone," Briggs further explained. "I think we're all right."

"What happened?" Brianna heard Braden ask as he tried to sit up.

"Stay still." Leila attempted to hold him down but she didn't look quite recovered and obviously didn't have the strength for he had no problem resisting her.

Braden held his side. "Is everyone all right?"

"I'm hit," Torque said.

Leila turned and crawled over to him. She looked at his arm. "It's not bad. I'll wrap it. It's a miracle none of us were killed. I can hardly believe it."

"We all have a destiny in this universe," Laszlo said, leaning against the wall.

"As in a higher power or fate?" Kam stared at him with narrowed eyes. "I think it was a little less mysterious than that. What did you do?"

Brianna wondered at his question, looking between the two men.

"All right. I helped out. A little. I projected false angles with my visionary powers as the Egesa fired. As best as I was able to anyhow."

"Well, whatever you did, it worked," Brianna said, grateful for any remaining powers Laszlo possessed.

Erik looked at the destroyed door. "Do you have any more tricks up your sleeve? Because we have a big problem now. We can't fix that door. We don't have the supplies or the equipment down here."

Brianna's heart sank.

Sam sat down beside her. "Can we use any of the Egesa equipment to get us all out of here? Like maybe their comm devices to call for help."

Pitch shook his head. "Their vid-comms will be monitored. If we try to use one, they'll zero right in on us and know their men weren't successful. They'll send in another team immediately."

Laszlo stood and walked over to pick up one of the devices. "I'll send an alpha-text message to their command fleet, saying they've got us cornered in the decon room, but their orbs were ineffective. I'll tell them that they're going to try to negotiate us out and if that doesn't work they plan to pump in non-toxic gas to flush us out. I'll let them know they won't report in again until their mission is complete. That should keep any other teams from showing up for several hours at least."

"Their ships are going to be a problem when we launch," Braden said.

"They won't keep their ships in orbit. Not with Xylon ships in the area. It would draw too much attention. They'll give the planet some distance, then move back in later. If we can continue to keep those ships out of orbit, it will make it easier for us to get away unnoticed. Hopefully, numerous Xylon rescue ships and fighters will be in the area to help us out."

"You're making a lot of assumptions," Brianna said. "Marid ships could have taken out most of our fighters by now, given their larger numbers."

"If our base on the Ice Moon is still operational, the Warriors will protect Xylon as best as they can in the hope of finding some survivors. We've already seen the rescue ships. I'm assuming they didn't come in without cover. So let's try to stay positive here."

"What about the Egesa's transport-connectors?" Josella asked.

Halah picked one up. "They're all military issue. They won't transport anyone who doesn't have an Egesa physiology."

"Which means they'd planned to kill us all?" Josella asked.

"Doubtful," Leila said. "They would have taken the babies and maybe Braden, I would think. I know the Egesa in medical purposely didn't use his disruptor when he tried to get to the triplets in the storage room. And he probably had the time to finish Braden off, and me, if he'd really wanted but he didn't. He just left us there and disappeared."

"He might have figured you'd be more valuable alive, at least temporarily, for information purposes. A medical team and interrogation squad were probably scheduled to transport down with one or more generic multitransport devices after the

area was secured." Brianna stretched her arms, still feeling half out of it, though her headache had eased.

"What are we going to do now?" Josella asked.

"Braden?" Brianna looked to her brother.

Braden's face darkened and he cleared his throat. "This doesn't change anything. Three people will still have to stay behind in this shelter. There's no other way. The weight capacity of the orbiters demand it. Unless someone has another idea."

"We're not sacrificing people," Erik said. "And it's two. Delemar is dead."

"Dead?" Braden's eyes narrowed and he glanced around. "How?"

Erik looked briefly at Torque. "Unknown."

"We'll do what we have to do," Laszlo said, looking up from the comm device, seemingly unaffected by the news.

Braden's brow furrowed. "Two," he replied in a low voice, not questioning the situation further. For now. "Actually we do have two of our own transport-connectors," he said slowly.

"They're not functional," Erik told him. "I used some of the parts to strengthen the power in the device we gave Alexa."

Braden nodded. "But can you and Halah use some of the generic parts from the Egesa devices to get ours working again and chain the power supplies to make them strong enough to reach Quadrant Port XST? Two of us could transport to the repair station where Alexa and the babies are."

Erik looked over at Halah. She shrugged. "We can try," Erik said, turning back to Braden. "But we can't test them. It could be a death sentence."

"Staying down here without any protection from the gases once the launch bays are opened is a definite death sentence. We have no choice."

Kam rubbed his throat. "Halah and I found the communication files from Frost on the computer. It detailed how to sabotage the power and oxygen. We can get those fixed now."

Laszlo set down the comm device. "Good. Leila and I will finalize the injections for Earth. Braden and Torque, you're coming to medical for your injuries. Josella, you come also. I want you to prepare two survival packs for whoever will be dematerializing out. Then maybe you can prepare something for us all to eat."

"Food sounds good." Torque rubbed his stomach. "I'm starving."

"How can you even think of food right now?" Halah asked.

"It's a basic need, sweetheart. Like sex."

"Don't ever call me —"

"Stop," Laszlo interrupted. "You're giving me a headache."

"It's the lack of oxygen," Leila said. "It should fade fairly quickly, especially once the oxygen levels start coming up."

Laszlo nodded. "Yes. Of course. Halah, you and Erik get those transport-connectors working. Kam, you fix the oxygen and get the levels back up so we all can think more clearly. Mistakes now could be deadly. Pitch, you fix the power drain. Kam can give you the specifics. Leila and I need to use a lot of equipment in medical and we can't afford anything becoming nonfunctional. Some of what we need was destroyed by disruptor fire but I think we can still manage, as long as we don't lose the main computer or the medical processor and the AMD."

"AMD?" Sam asked.

"It's a machine that quickly tests the effects of certain compounds on DNA types and detects deadly flaws in serum and other compositions," Leila explained. "That machine is going on the orbiter with the team to Earth. It's indispensable."

"What about Sam and me?" Brianna asked. "What do you want us to do?"

"Get some rest," Laszlo said. "You two have been through enough today. You'll need to be sharp for the mission."

His answer surprised her but she was grateful and nodded.

Laszlo turned and headed out the door. "Let's get to our duties."

* * * * *

Nav-Control Ship FSMF-36, Deep Space

Frost paced in her quarters. Worry, anticipation and frustration swirled inside her. She needed news. The last transmission she'd received from her soldiers had not been good. Apparently, they had the Xylons trapped in one part of the shelter but couldn't get to them.

Nuclear orbs ineffective, they'd reported. Hard to believe, given the age of those shelters.

Normally, she'd order poisonous gas to be pumped in through the air filters but she had no way of knowing if the babies were in the room. Or Kam. He was still down there and alive. And she wanted him kept alive. She fingered the controller around her neck.

From the reports, Alexa and the babies had dematerialized out of medical when one of the Egesa tried to capture them, but she didn't know where they'd gone. Someplace else in the shelter obviously. Most likely the same room as the others.

Unless...

She rushed over to her computer and pulled up some star charts as well as the current log of ships in the area around Xylon. The Warriors' communication grid was down, so they couldn't message anyone. Trying to transport up to an orbiter without stable coordinates would be too risky.

Wait! Her eyes narrowed as she studied the screen. Was it possible?

She pulled up additional information. Quadrant Port XST. Holding a steady orbit. Barely. "They'd need a multitransport device with extra power." Which was doubtful.

However, she hadn't gotten where she was by being careless. No more transmissions had been received from her contact, who was with the Xylons. He might have been discovered. She couldn't count on any further help from him.

She would be working on her own now. She'd order a team to investigate the old repair station. The capture of those triplets was too important not to check out every possibility.

This was one battle she did not intend to lose.

Chapter Twenty

The door to Laszlo's quarters slid closed behind Brianna. Sam had entered ahead of her and was headed to the back of the room. He set some fruit and protein cubes on the table.

She followed and they both sat down to eat. Brianna enjoyed just being in the same space with him, especially now that the immediate danger had passed and they had some quiet time. Too bad it wouldn't last.

"I'm impressed with how fast Braden is healing. And my own cut." He stared down at the now small scar on his arm. "Will I always be able to heal as fast now?"

"Yes. It won't work as well for you as it does for us but your natural healing will be greatly accelerated. Don't get careless because of that though. You can still be killed."

He nodded. "Understood."

"By the way, thanks for saving my life."

He smiled. "Any time. Those Egesa are formidable creatures. We've got a real fight ahead of us."

"Yes we do." She popped a protein cube into her mouth and watched Sam chew on a piece of fruit. As he swallowed, his eyes took on a serious look. He stared at her unblinkingly.

Her nerves kicked into high gear. "What?" She hadn't seen that particular expression on his face before and felt something major was on his mind.

"Do Xylon women ever take alien men as mates?"

The question seemed to come out of nowhere and definitely took her by surprise. Her heart pounded triple time. "Why?"

"Do they?"

"Um, no. Not officially. If the male doesn't have any Xylon blood, he won't have a brain chip and he can't Brand a mate." Her voice lowered. "There would be no way for an alien male to establish a real and permanent connection to a Xylon female." She looked at him a moment, then stood and walked over to the computer, having lost her appetite.

She held back a sniffle, refusing to break down in front of him. In her exhaustion, her emotions were all over the place. Talking about mates made her feel exceptionally lonely.

The communication files Kam had spoken of earlier were displayed on the computer screen. He and Halah had obviously used Laszlo's computer to track down the messages. From what she could see, a list of sabotage steps had been given to

Delemar. She wondered what he'd bargained for in return, what could have been so important to him that he would betray his own people and try to kill them all.

She heard Sam push his chair back and she felt his approach.

He wrapped his arms around her. "There was a time on Earth when not everyone who wanted to be mated could do so legally." He nuzzled her neck. "That didn't stop them from committing themselves to each other."

"What do you mean?" she whispered, settling back against him.

"They would have a commitment ceremony and pledge their love."

"A ceremony?" Not a legal one though, he'd said. "But because it's not legal, there's no real bond. Right?"

He turned her around in his arms. "The bond is even more real, Brianna, for it's a bond of hearts. A conscious decision to stay with someone."

"Or not. You can just walk away at any time, even after your *official* ceremonies, from what I understand. It's not like a Xylon lifelong joining."

A smile tugged at his lips. "An artificial shackle is not necessary for those who are truly destined to be together. Nothing can tear apart that kind of love."

"Why are you telling me this?"

His hands slid up her arms and he cupped her face. "I love you, Brianna."

She audibly gasped.

"After everything that's happened and everything we've been through together...I don't want us to be separated. Ever. It would break my heart not to have you by my side."

At his confession, her soul wept. Everything was happening so fast. "We're both military. We serve different commanders. We can't make those choices. Our duties are going to pull us apart. Unless we turn our backs on those duties. And I couldn't do that."

He nodded. "We both know we're going to remain true to our commitments." He tapped his chest. "But in our hearts we can make our own lifetime decision. We can have it all. I know we can."

Was that truly possible?

"Do you love me?"

"Yes!" she answered without hesitation. She loved him so much that it hurt.

A huge smile crossed his face. He pulled her over to the bed and they sat down. "Then join with me."

"How?"

He took her hand in his and looked into her eyes. "Remember these words." He sucked in a deep breath and then let it out slowly. "I, Samuel Briggs, take you, Brianna Koll, as my mate over all others. I promise to love, honor, cherish and respect you forever. This is my pledge. From my heart. From my soul."

Brianna's mind raced. She so wanted this and realized that Sam was right. Two people who truly loved each other shouldn't need any artificial means to stay connected. The commitment should come from deep within themselves, if the feelings were genuine. Perhaps Earth *had* found the better way.

She squeezed his hand, remembering his words. "I, Brianna Koll, take you, Samuel Briggs, as my mate over all others. I promise to love, honor, cherish and respect you forever. This is my pledge. From my heart. From my soul."

He leaned in and kissed her, his tongue lightly grazing hers. She couldn't stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks. He pulled back and brushed the drops away with his thumb.

He released her hand and pulled a set of tags out of a pocket in his uniform. "These are called dog tags. They were passed down to me. They originally belonged to my great-great grandfather—I'm probably leaving out a couple of *greats*—whom I was named after. They were once used in the military for identification. They're not used anymore but they have his name, my name, on them. I carry them for luck." He slipped them over her neck. "As long as you wear my name, they will identify you as my mate, in my heart."

She fingered the tags and the raised words on them, then pulled a round identification jewel from her uniform and attached it to his lapel. Six knot-shaped golden strands with a royal blue center. "This is the Koll family insignia with my personal gem attached. It will identify you as one of us. And as my mate in my heart. Keep it close to you at all times."

He touched the insignia lightly. "I'm honored and will wear it with pride." He took her into his arms and kissed her deeply.

Brianna pulled at his uniform. She needed him. Her love. *My mate*. Gently, they removed each other's clothing and boots, dropping everything to the floor.

As they stretched out on the bed, Sam massaged her body, as if memorizing every inch of her. Whenever he touched a sensitive area, she sighed, letting him know all her special erogenous zones. When she didn't think she could take much more, he finally slipped between her thighs and his cock eased into her pussy, slow and deep. They fit together perfectly and she sighed. He took her hands in his and their fingers intertwined. She'd never felt so right as when she was with this man. He kissed her softly, as his hips moved against her in a steady rhythm.

She sighed in ecstasy. Whether he fucked her hard or softly, she loved having him inside her. She felt her body responding and wrapped her legs around his hips. They didn't need any words, just the incredible feelings they gave to one another. An orgasm fluttered through her, growing deeper and stronger as he moved within her. *Yes*. Ecstasy bound, as always, with this man she loved more than any other.

"Look at me," he urged in a quiet tone.

Brianna looked into his eyes and felt a connection more powerful than anything she'd ever known. More than physical, more than mental. A bonding of two hearts and two souls. "Sam!" She came hard.

"Yes!" He groaned and joined her in his own climax.

They collapsed together against the pillows. She stroked the back of his neck. "Do you think it will always be like that?"

He shifted to hold her in his arms. "Yes, I do." He touched her hip, then slid his hand between her legs. "Your body was made for my touch."

Though she'd just come, she still craved him. She eased her legs open. "Sometimes I think that's actually true."

"Only sometimes?" He chuckled and stroked her clit.

"Mmm. The more we do this, the more I think it." She shifted to lie flat on the mattress. "You satisfy me more than any man ever has, as if you know all my secret needs."

He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Roll over. I want to fuck you in the ass."

"I think you've developed an ass fetish."

"I won't argue with that." He helped her onto her stomach.

She pulled a pillow into her arms and rested her cheek on the soft material. She'd allow him anything he wanted sexually. No boundaries.

His hands massaged her ass, relaxing her. In fact, she almost fell asleep. Until he smacked her hard.

She jerked and looked over her shoulder at him.

He gently rubbed the spot. "Too hard?" He smiled and smacked her again on the other cheek. Just as hard.

She whimpered and hung her head. It wasn't too hard and he knew it. She liked it hard. Craved it hard. When he slapped her ass again, she shook and couldn't stay quiet. "Faster, Sam. Spank me faster."

His hand came down first on one cheek then the other. Over and over, until her skin burned and her cunt throbbed in need. The sharp smacks echoed in the room, as did her increasingly loud moans.

He leaned down and whispered. "Have you been punished enough?"

She nodded, ready for him to fuck her.

"Too bad, because I will decide." He spanked her again, covering her entire ass, alternating between cheeks. Faster and faster.

"Oh...oh...oh!"

Then in a split second, he pulled her ass cheeks wide and plunged his tongue into her hole.

"Ah, Sam!" The moistness of his tongue and the burning of her skin shot sexual sparks right through her. She felt it from her nipples to her clit. "Yes! Tongue-fuck my

asshole! Ah, that feels phenomenal." She pressed hard against the mattress, then burrowed her hand down to rub her clit.

He grabbed her hands and pulled them behind her back, holding her wrists captive. She felt his saliva sliding down her crack to her pussy. She squirmed and moaned, needing to come so badly she was practically sobbing.

Releasing her wrists, he pulled out of her. "On your knees," he ordered, his voice gruff with passion.

She scrambled onto her knees. When he grabbed her arms again, her upper body fell to the mattress, her ass up in the air. He put her hands on her ass.

"Spread your cheeks wide and tell me to fuck you."

Brianna's heart beat triple time. She pulled open her ass cheeks, feeling extremely vulnerable in this position, but extremely in need of his dominance, for she knew he was about to give her an orgasm like no other. "Fuck me," she whispered.

"Louder."

"Fuck me, Sam! Fuck me in the ass!" She needed his cock desperately.

He growled and plunged a finger into her hole. She moaned in disappointment. He pulled it out and stuck in three fingers, fucking her hard. "You want my fist in there?"

"I want your cock!"

He pulled out his fingers and positioned his cock at her entrance. When he didn't move, she made a noise of frustration. "My cock's not going to fuck your ass, Brianna. I want your ass to fuck my cock. Do it to yourself."

Without hesitation, she pushed back, forcing his cock into her ass. Oh what a feeling! He wasn't moving. She controlled the depth and speed. She released her cheeks and rose up on her hands. She rocked back and forth, faster and faster. Fucking her ass on his cock.

"Ah...yeah. More, Brianna. Don't stop."

"I can't do it hard enough. Please, Sam."

Unexpectedly, he pulled her arms out from under her and she fell flat on the bed again, his cock embedded in her ass. When they bounced on the mattress, his cock went deep. Sexually impaled, they both lay there, breathing heavily.

Sam grabbed her hands and intertwined their fingers. He held her arms against the mattress and began fucking her ass hard. "Is this hard enough?" He grunted with each thrust.

"Oh! Yes! Perfect."

He forced one of her hands beneath her and their entwined fingers played with her clit—rubbing, tugging, pinching. Brianna began to shake.

Sam licked her ear. "Come on our hands. I'm going to come in your ass."

"Yes! Just one more hard, deep thrust." He accommodated her and her body exploded. She thrashed against him. "Sam!" Her juices coated their fingers and the mattress. "Oh!"

"Fuck yeah!" His body stiffened and he came. "Ah!"

His cum filled her ass and she felt wetness slide down her crack and between her legs. He pumped her ass a few more times, then collapsed.

Once spent, he snuggled beside her and whispered in her ear. "You are mine, Brianna. Forever."

* * * * *

Josella watched Leila step back from the lab table and stretch, then rub her back. The woman looked exhausted.

"That's it," Leila said.

Laszlo nodded. "We'll get it all loaded into the orbiter."

Josella had already prepared the survival packs. No more packs had been wear-ready when she'd searched the supply room, so she'd put two together as Laszlo had requested. After she'd put them together, she then saw to it that everyone got fed. Now she paused as she neared the lab table. "That can't be enough for all the military males on Earth."

"No," Leila replied. "It's not. We can't create and transport enough for the entire planet. Once on Earth, after we test it on a full-blooded Earth man to verify its effectiveness, we'll need to set up a lab there so we can make more. Briggs will have some contacts to help us with that. Right, Laszlo?"

"Yes."

"What if it doesn't work?" Josella asked.

Leila looked down before answering, obviously distressed. "Then it's all over. Xylon and Earth and all other free systems lose. We can't defeat Daegal without Earth's help and Earth can't survive the Egesa without our help."

"We've got it," Erik announced, entering medical. Halah entered behind him. "The devices are working and programmed," he said.

Laszlo held out his hand. "Let me see them. I know a thing or two about Egesa technology and compatibility issues. I want to check them over."

Erik handed him the two transport-connectors.

Josella breathed a sigh of relief that they'd been able to get the devices repaired. Still, even in her relief, she knew all their problems hadn't been solved. They had a lot of obstacles to overcome yet.

"The devices should work," Halah said to her. "Don't worry."

Laszlo turned and walked to the other end of medical as he examined them.

"I'm going to check on Kam's progress. See if he needs any help." Halah gave Josella a hug. "It's going to be all right," she whispered.

Josella nodded, hugging her sister back. Sadness overcame her as she watched Halah turn to leave. She hoped they'd both get out of here safely. There was no way to be certain if those transport-connectors would work and they both knew it.

She'd already prepared herself to be one of the two left who would need to use one of the devices. She'd seen the knowledge in Halah's eyes as well. She had no military skills, so there was no reason for them to give her a seat on one of the orbiters.

Leila stepped closer to Erik and went into his arms. "I'm beat."

"You two go back to your quarters and get some rest," Laszlo told them, still studying the transport-connectors. "You need to be fresh for tomorrow."

"I have to keep an eye on Braden." Leila glanced over at him, asleep on the other side of the room. "And I'll need to change Torque's bandage later. Where did he go?"

"He's helping Pitch. I passed him in the corridor," Erik said.

"I'll keep an eye on Braden." Josella wanted to feel useful and help out where she could. "If anything seems wrong, I'll call you. I can change Torque's bandage too. I got pretty good at bandages while I was on the Sand Moon."

Leila didn't hesitate. She mouthed a "thank you". She and Erik strolled from the room with arms around each other's waists.

After they'd gone, Josella cocked her head as she watched Laszlo. "What are you doing?"

"Checking these over."

"Are you fixing something?"

His brow furrowed but he didn't look at her. "Why do you ask that?"

"It looks like you're pressing a lot of buttons." She hated to think that Erik and Halah had made any mistakes. If so, they might have made more than one. What if Laszlo didn't catch everything?

"I'm just doing a standard check."

"I see." She didn't know if he was telling her the truth or simply trying not to worry her. Not having control over her future made her extremely nervous. But at this point, there wasn't anything more she could do except trust everyone's knowledge and hope it was sufficient.

Soon all their fates would be decided. Along with the fate of free systems everywhere.

* * * * *

Underground

Tara woke with a start. She'd heard... She shook her head.

Had she been crying in her sleep? She rarely cried but the pain in her body had been so severe lately that it wouldn't have surprised her. Though she'd probably just been dreaming.

Her vision was improving. Her body was healing too. Slowly. Her hands were still wrapped. She'd tried to remove the bandages but hadn't been able to. She knew something was wrong with her face. She could feel it when she was fed. She'd never considered herself vain but she wondered how bad the damage was.

She pushed the disturbing thought aside. Right now she didn't need to dwell on such things. She needed to survive, first and foremost.

She cocked her head. There was that sound again. It did sound like crying. Maybe. It stopped too quickly for her to be certain.

There might be another prisoner down here. Another female. She stood and walked around, hoping to hear the odd noise again, so she could pinpoint the location.

With only a woman attending her now, as soon as she got these bandages off her hands, she was out of here. By then, her eyesight would probably be completely back to normal too, if it kept clearing at the rate it had been.

One way another, she was going to find her way back to her family. If any of them had survived. Or she'd die trying.

Chapter Twenty-One

Early Morning

Brianna clutched Sam's hand as they entered the conference room for their last meeting before leaving the shelter. She didn't know what the reception would be when the others saw her insignia on his uniform.

She cared what her family thought but she loved Sam with all her heart. Nothing was going to change her feelings for him or her commitment to him.

When they stepped inside, everyone else was already present and seated. They all stared at her and Sam, their eyes immediately zeroing in on his uniform. All except Josella.

Josella did seem to feel the tension though and looked around with a confused expression. A frustrated expression crossed Laszlo's face but he didn't say anything. A small smile played on Halah's lips. Leila looked worried. Brianna couldn't make out Pitch's or Kam's expressions. Erik, Torque and Braden definitely weren't happy.

"What the hell is your ID jewel on his uniform supposed to mean?" Torque finally bellowed.

As Brianna was about to answer, Sam stepped slightly in front of her in a protective gesture. "It means that we're mated now."

"Mated?" Torque barked out a very unfunny-sounding laugh. "Yeah, right. In what universe? Fucking her doesn't mean you're mated, Earth man. She's known a cock or two before yours. You're just another set of balls."

Sam's eyes narrowed and he took another step forward—an aggressive step this time. "Don't you *ever* speak—"

"It's all right." Brianna grabbed Sam's arm and pulled him back.

"No it's not, Brianna."

She leaned into him. "Torque speaks before he thinks. It's a disease."

Torque grunted.

She looked around the table. "We're mated. So from now on, hold your tongues. And your opinions."

"It's not official," Braden said in a low, calm voice. "You have the right of first choice to him exclusively as a lover, over any other female Xylon, since you led his Initiation. That's all. Anything else requires Council approval, which isn't going to happen."

"There is no Council to approve or disapprove anything," Halah said, looking at Braden. "And forming a new one will take time. The old rules no longer exist."

"We can't pick and choose which rules to follow," Braden responded. "Not if we want to remain true to our heritage and who we've fought so hard to become."

"Kam and I were mated without a Council's seal of approval. Everyone accepts our joining. From what I understand, several of us became joined without complete approval."

"That's different," Braden said. "In all our cases, the males have been part or full Xylon, which means we all were able to go through the Branding ceremony to make the joining official and permanent."

"It's official and permanent to me...and him." Brianna raised her chin, daring any of them to challenge her.

Everyone sat in silence.

Laszlo finally cleared his throat. "Take your seats, Brianna and Briggs. We have other things to discuss right now."

Brianna let out a heavy breath. Somehow she doubted the discussion concerning her and Sam joining as mates, was over, but for now she was happy to have other matters of importance to deal with.

"I've decided on the orbiter crews," Laszlo said. "For the orbiter going to Earth, obviously Briggs will be aboard. Leila will also need to go to handle the injections and to set up a lab for the production of more. I want to send some muscle with you, so Torque will be a part of the mission too."

Torque smiled for the first time, suddenly looking much more relaxed.

Laszlo stood, walked over to him and handed him his own command insignia. "I'm *partially* reinstating your command status. I want you to organize the Warriors who are already stationed on Earth. I'm sure they're all in a state of shock right now. They'll need information and guidance. I don't have an official CI to give you, so you'll wear mine and you will carry my authority."

Torque looked to be in a state of shock. Slowly, an expression of pride crossed his face. He fingered the insignia, then attached it to his uniform.

"Halah, you will be going too. I want a good flight officer on board who can handle the craft and any problems that might crop up. Also they'll need someone who's very familiar with Egesa behavior and technology."

She nodded. "Is my rank reinstated?"

"Yes. Fully reinstated. You can reattach your insignia. Lastly, Brianna, you will be a part of the Earth mission as well."

Me? She couldn't believe it. *Yes.* She squeezed Sam's arm.

"Um..." Halah looked at Kam, then at Laszlo. "Wouldn't Kam be a better choice? He's more familiar with Earth and their customs than any of us."

"I can't trust that his medical condition won't worsen. Leila won't have access to advanced medical equipment while on Earth. It's too risky. Brianna will be going." His

gaze found hers. "I trust your levelheadedness to keep things under control. As the only fully-instated command officer on board, you will be in charge of the mission."

"Understood." She felt more grateful to Laszlo than she could say. He just as easily could have sent Erik in her place for she suspected he didn't approve of her and Sam as mates. It would have been the perfect opportunity to separate them.

"Now for the orbiter going to the Ice Moon. I will be on board so I can reestablish command once we reach the moon. Braden, you will be on board and in charge of reorganizing the Warrior Fleets, if enough long-range orbiters are available. Are you up to that?"

"I'd like to be one of the transports to the repair station."

Brianna worried about Braden. He looked to still be in a lot of pain. He'd heal quickly but the added stress brought on by his concern over Alexa and the babies wouldn't help.

Laszlo remained silent for several moments. "I need you as my second in command, by my side. Duty must come first in this."

"I have a duty to my family."

"Serving your people will serve your family. Remember, they're my family too. Their survival is imperative. I will do what's best to protect them. And this is best. I've made my decision."

Braden didn't argue further but Brianna saw the emotions in her brother's eyes. She hoped he wouldn't do anything stupid. If they all didn't work together to defeat their enemies, none of them might survive.

"Erik, you will also come to the moon with us. You will lead the fleets once they're organized and on their way to Earth."

"My last choice was a difficult one. I want Pitch on the Ice Moon to take control over Security Command and reorganize things. However, I also believe Kam needs to be checked out thoroughly by a medical team before his condition deteriorates."

"I'm fine," Kam said. "It won't be that long before help arrives at the repair station."

"As my son, I want you nearby at this time of crisis. With my illness, I'll need your help and insight. Besides, if the transport-connectors don't work..."

"I'll volunteer to go to the repair station with Josella," Pitch said. "I'm more familiar with the station anyway. If anything goes wrong there before rescue arrives, I can fix it more easily than Kam. Its orbit is already shaky and the explosion on Xylon might have weakened its hold even more."

Josella smiled softly at him. Laszlo hadn't needed to say Josella would be one of the two going to the station. That choice had been apparent from the beginning. Obviously she'd be happy if Pitch accompanied her.

Brianna noticed Braden squirm when Pitch mentioned possible problems with the repair station. Without power from Xylon's central space control boosting the station's

orbit, it actually could be in trouble soon. They would need to get rescue ships sent out quickly to make certain of everyone's survival.

"Good. It's decided," Laszlo said, finality in his voice. He stood from his chair. "Let's go."

Everyone slowly rose and the tension that always preceded a new mission filled the room.

Brianna looked at Sam and for the first time in a long while she held out hope for their future. For all their futures.

She turned to address everyone. "Xylon and Earth will survive this." She looked into her brothers' eyes—first Torque's, then Braden's. She saw their love for her and knew they cared for her as much as she did for them.

Now Sam was a part of her family too. She was proud to call him her mate.

As he slipped his arm around her waist, she laid her palm on his heart and leaned against his side. "May the fates grant us the victory we seek."

Torque snorted. "I'll be happy if they just don't shit on our heads."

Nervous laughter filled the room.

Torque was the first one out the door and he led the others down to the sublevel. He felt a combination of aggravation, expectation and hesitation—a strange mix of emotions. But then, a huge responsibility had been placed on his shoulders. He would be representing Laszlo on Earth when dealing with the resident Warriors. He'd held a command position before but this was so much more important than anything he'd ever had to do.

On top of that, he was still dealing with intense sexual visions of a woman he'd never met. They overtook him every time he slept and often when he was fully awake. She'd become an obsession and he even felt as though this mysterious woman was destined to be his. He shook his head, knowing how crazy that sounded, even to him. Maybe the stress was finally getting to him. "Don't lose it now," he mumbled. He had a job to do.

After all of them descended and stopped between the docking bays, Laszlo spoke. "Pitch and Josella, you'll need to head on out. You can't be here when we open the bays."

Pitch nodded. Josella went into Halah's arms for one last hug. Torque slapped Pitch on the back. "Alexa will be happy to see you two, I'm sure."

The other Warriors stepped up to say goodbye. Torque's attention drifted toward where the larger orbiter was docked. He and Halah should pilot the ship, for they were most familiar with this older model. He'd speak with Brianna about it after boarding. Hopefully the orbiter would make it to their destination without falling apart.

"I'm ready," Josella said, stepping back beside Pitch, but never taking her eyes off her sister.

Everyone stepped away. Pitch slid one arm around her waist and activated the transport-connector. A low hum filled the air and then they were gone.

Torque approached Braden and they clasped arms. "Heal quickly, brother."

"I will. Be careful."

"Aren't I always?"

"Not that I can remember."

Torque laughed and released his hold. He stepped aside for Brianna to say a last goodbye. Leila and Erik huddled close, as did Halah and Kam. Laszlo stepped up to him.

"Tell Brianna that I've checked the space traffic. There are several Xylon fighters in the area. Short-range orbiters. Once we're out and spotted, execute a signaling maneuver. It'll be the only way for us to communicate with them. If they follow procedure, half will follow me and half will follow you as far as they can go. They'll provide the extra cover you need to get away. We should be able to get out of here unscathed if we move quickly."

"The Egesa?"

"The Egesa are out there too, but I haven't detected any large ships or heavy fighters, just short-range orbiters, like ours. Our people will be watching them closely and will keep them off you until you get out of range. You won't have any worries."

"Until we get to Earth."

"Yes. Try not to call too much attention to yourselves. We'll be there as soon as we can."

Laszlo turned and headed for the short-range orbiter. Braden, Erik and Kam followed. Torque walked to the long-range orbiter's docking bay and waited for Briggs, Brianna, Halah and Leila to board. He looked back at their temporary shelter, grateful to be alive. He knew their future was still uncertain but he held out hope. Xylon's Warriors would not go down without a fight.

* * * * *

*Planet Earth, State of Colorado, U.S.A.
Underground Tracking Facility*

"Ah..." Jaeda sat up on her bunk, startled out of a deep sleep. Her whole body tingled and beads of sweat rolled between her breasts. She'd had at least one orgasm. Probably more from how satiated she felt.

Her mysterious hunk never failed to please her. But that hadn't been what had woken her. She gripped her hands, trying to steady her nerves. And her turbulent thoughts.

He was coming.

Her limbs shook from the knowledge. She didn't know how she knew but she did and the anticipation overwhelmed her.

"No." With a shake of her head and a sigh, she lay back down. "That's silly. It's just wishful thinking."

Or so she tried to convince herself.

Somewhere deep down though, she felt him, like a tangible presence, and heard his voice whispering in her head. Over and over.

Soon you will be mine.

She flipped over onto her stomach. "Stop teasing me with impossibilities," she whispered. She glanced at the clock. Three hours before her shift. "Just fuck me. At least what I feel when you do is real, even if it's only in my dreams."

As she closed her eyes, a deep chuckle filled her head.

Her imagination was getting the better of her. If she ever did come face to face with the man in her dreams, she would probably faint dead away. Or rip his clothes off and demand he plunge his cock deep inside her.

She couldn't help but wonder which man would be to her preference. Her fantasy or the reality. It didn't matter, she supposed, for it was crazy to think that she'd ever truly find out.

Maybe it would be better to push him from her thoughts completely. Not better for her emotions but better for her sanity. Before she became so captivated by him that nothing else mattered.

Though, she feared it might already be too late for that. Too much had happened. And now, she worried about what else was to come. She worried about Earth.

The destruction of Xylon, the mysterious blip headed their way, the panic her people had related. If her theory proved correct and the Egesa Slave Masters were on their way, it could change all their lives and the universe forever.

A voice tugged at the back of her mind. *Do not worry, my love. Just sleep. Sleep...*

About the Author

Ruth D. Kerce got hooked on writing in the fifth grade when she won a short story contest—a romance, of course. And she's been writing romance ever since.

She writes several subgenres of romance—historical, contemporary, and futuristic. Her books are available online in many internet bookstores. Her short stories and articles are available on several websites. She has won or placed in writing contests and hopes to continue to write exciting tales for years to come.

Ruth welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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